

Advent, Day 8—December 8, 2024

Prepare

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

These words concluded Zechariah’s prophecy, spoken to his baby son John. John would grow up to prepare the way of the messiah, his cousin brother Jesus. With Zechariah’s prophesying and Elizabeth’s raising, they were preparing the way for the one who would prepare the Way. John would prepare the way by calling people to repentance and thus to reparation and reconciliation. He recognized that for hearts to be prepared for transformation, they first had to go through a process of making things right, of justice. He, of course, would do more. He would prepare the way by struggling against the Herods and thus their imperial overlords. He would prepare the way by leading his own group of disciples on a parallel journey to that of Jesus. Throughout his life, he would prepare the way boldly and loudly. How do we, likewise, prepare the way this year? Particularly during this week that started with the lighting of the PEACE candle, how do we prepare the way? Here is an excerpt from today’s sermon with some possibilities:

The children of Gaza are still being targeted by Israel’s genocidal bombardment. Guns continue to wreak havoc upon the lives of children in the United States. Sudanese civilians are still being slaughtered in civil war. The scale of weaponry in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is getting scarier. Gangs in Haiti have catalyzed catastrophe. War in Syria has erupted anew. Circles of peace have the power to disrupt these cycles and foster healing—if we were to join hand in hand and encircle the vulnerable with protection, if we were to link

arms and encircle the weapons manufacturers with blockades, if we were to wrap our arms around those who are hurting and encircle them with love.

As a human family, though, we are not doing nearly enough encircling. Instead, we are breaking apart and isolating. We are watching violence on our screens with morbid fascination and then burying our heads in the sand when it comes to actually doing something about it. We need a wakeup call. We need God's Word to shake us out of our passiveness. God's Word often comes to us most powerfully through prophets who are not afraid to upend the status quo. And so we need to listen to the prophets of peace. And so we ourselves need to embody what I will call prophetic peace—a peace that speaks truth to power and demands transformation...

“To guide our feet into the way of peace.” Those are the words of Zechariah, whose spirit had been so disturbed for so long, who lived under the constant violence of imperial occupation. And I want to make note of something very important in his phrasing. He talks about peace as a process, very particularly as a journey. And so, he talks about peace as an action, not simply as a state of being. Peace is a road that must be walked. Peace is a way that must be lived. That is very different from the ways that we usually talk about peace in our context, in which we wish for world peace as though it can be magically summoned, and in which we so often define peace in the negative, as an absence—an absence of noise, an absence of struggle. Yes, Zechariah certainly was not speaking of peace in these ways! Indeed, I don't think I have ever considered his son John through that lens of peace, our wild eyed, wild haired, wild clothed, wild prophet who cried out in the wilderness deliberately disturbing people's peace in order to get them to repent and who ended up being beheaded for disturbing the peace of the Herods. And then there is the Prince of Peace, who would angrily wreak havoc upon the moneychangers' tables and who would declare, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword!” Yes, how do we reconcile John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth with PEACE?

We do so by drawing upon Zechariah's prophetic definition of peace as journey,

as process, as action. John the Baptist understood that the people could never experience inner peace if their souls and spirits were disturbed by guilt and unaddressed sin. They had to take action to repair what they had broken. They had to confess what they had done wrong. They had to repent and commit to transformation of their behavior. Only then could they experience peace. Jesus of Nazareth understood that there could never be external interpersonal or intercommunal peace as long as there was injustice and structural violence. No justice, no peace! Know justice, know peace! And so, even though John and Jesus would fit our context's definition of disturbers of peace, they were in fact journeyers upon the way of peace. This is what Zechariah foresaw when he prophesied peace, the two disturbers of peace who would be known as the Prince of Peace and the Prophet of the Prince of Peace.

And that, my friends, is why I find today's passage, today's theme, today's candle lighting, so powerful, so meaningful, so necessary. When I look outward upon a world riven by war, upon children's lives destroyed by weapons of war, I cannot feel peace. But I can see injustice. When I look inward upon my shaken soul and disturbed spirit, I do not see peace. But I can feel a desperate urge to act in order to create peace.

When gun violence erupts in our schools and in our streets, we cannot find peace by keeping calm and carrying on, by avoiding conflict, by refusing to trouble the waters of American politics. We are called to put on our shoes and to allow God to guide our feet into the way of prophetic peace—to march in protest of our nation's idolatry of weapons of war—handguns, semi-automatic firearms, and assault rifles. When war is waged across the world, destroying the lives of children, the poor, and the marginalized, we cannot find peace with empty platitudes while we support systems of economics and industries that perpetrate and perpetuate those wars for the sake of profit. We are called to put on our shoes and to allow God to guide our feet into the way of peace—to flip the tables of the money changers, to demand divestment from corporations that make weapons and that consume scarce natural resources, and to invest in the communities of the very poor and marginalized whose lives are being taken.

Advent, Day 9—December 9, 2024

Peace

“Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me.” It’s a beautiful song and a beautiful sentiment. There is deep truth in the concept of interconnecting, interdependent realms of peace. If there is to be peace on Earth, then there must be peace within each of the humans on Earth, we creatures who consciously choose violence. What, exactly, does it mean, though? In this week that started with the lighting of the PEACE candle, how can peace on Earth begin with me?

There are multiple ways we can ponder it, and those ways are interconnected and valid. We should seek peace within ourselves in the sense of calming inner turmoil. This means resolving the self-directed violence that rages within us due to self doubt, self loathing, guilt, and fear. It also means resolving other-directed violent thought, like bias, judgment, hatred, and, again, fear. Letting peace begin with me can also be pondered in the sense of other-directed peace. This means being in right relationship with the people we encounter in our lives. Right relationship requires that we do all that we can to avoid harming others and, when we do end up doing so, to acknowledge and repair the harm that we have caused. This sort of peace requires that we pay attention to harm we cause with action and inaction at interpersonal and structural levels (economics, politics, consumption, and privilege). Finally, peace on Earth can begin with me in the sense that I can be an active agent of peace in this world. We can be prophets of peace, agitators for peace, disturbers of the “peace” of the status quo. We can join movements. We can start movements. We can use our sacred imaginations to envision new possibilities and then work to make those happen.

So, how can peace on Earth begin with me? Through right relationship with myself, right relationship with others, and right action for the transformation of the world. We’ll get more into it as the week proceeds!

“For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”—Isaiah 9:6

Advent, Day 10—December 10, 2024

Justice

We cannot spend a week focused on peace without also focusing on justice. As the simple yet profound protest slogan goes, “No Justice, No Peace!” This slogan has rung out at least since the murder of Michael Brown, and I imagine it predates that dark day in human history. It has certainly been heard in the streets ever since. There is powerful call to action within it for those who are protesting—until there is justice for those harmed, we will keep disturbing the “peace” of the status quo. Behind and beyond that powerful call, there is also a powerful truth. There is no such thing as true peace unless there is actual justice in this world.

Justice should not be confused with what we call the “justice” system in this country—that modern day system incarceration, exploitation, and slavery. Just refers to the action that must be taken in order for there to be right relationship—acknowledgement of and reparation for harm. True peace, in turn, depends on us being in right relationship with each other. So, no justice, no peace.

Justice in this world would require the total transformation of this world. It would require transformation of ideas and systems of property ownership and resource distribution. It would require preferential treatment of the poor and oppressed in our structures and societies. It would require love. In short, it would require the changes that were preached thousands of years ago by a messiah who ushered in a different kind of kingdom. It would require the principles of a community of disciples as described in *Acts*. It would require us

to commit to being such disciples of such a messiah in new and exciting ways. What better way could there be to spend Advent than to reflect on this and act on this? Know justice, know peace!

“But let justice roll down like water”—Amos 5:24a

Advent, Day 11—December 11, 2024

Righteousness

If we think of justice as right relationship at the systemic and societal level, we can think of righteousness as our individual embodiment of it. Righteousness is, quite simply, the right way of acting towards other people, towards Creation, towards ourselves, and towards God. Righteousness often gets a bad rap because our frequent use of “self-righteousness.” When we act self-righteously, we present with the arrogant fallacy that we are better than others and that we are responsible for our inherent goodness. “Self-righteous” is an apt way to describe us religious folks when we wear those hypocritical holier-than-thou attitudes. True righteousness comes from our decision to live into the inherent goodness that God creates in us.

Thankfully we have the example of God incarnate as a human being to show us the ways of righteousness, the ways of living into our inherent goodness! We celebrate the coming of that incarnate righteousness this season of Advent. Jesus of Nazareth sought to embody righteousness in every context and interaction—in using his power to heal and to feed, in using his teachings to lift up the last and the least, in communing with God and Creation, in making a scene with his rage in the temple, and even in his openness to changing his mind when he was in the wrong with the Syrophenician woman. May we use every encounter as an opportunity to do likewise!

“...and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”—Amos 5:24b

Advent, Day 12—December 12, 2024

Ceasefire

“Coventry Carol” is one of those haunting tunes that sticks in my head throughout Advent and Christmas, and I have been listening to the words more this year. It tells the story of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, from *Matthew 2*: “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” To escape this brutality, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had to flee to Egypt as refugees.

Any discussion of peace, justice, and righteousness in the context of the world of today is severely incomplete without acknowledgement of how the slaughter of the innocents is being perpetrated in Palestine again with eerily parallel precision. Much like King Herod of old, the Israeli leaders of today are slaughtering children who might one day challenge the occupation and oppression of their land and people. Of the more than 40,000 people killed by Israeli forces in Gaza, 44% have been children. The largest age group of children is five to nine, with the youngest child being one day old. Much like King Herod of old, the Israeli leaders of today are receiving weapons and military support from the dominant imperial power. Much like the families of babies in Palestine of old, Palestinian families of today know unbearable grief for their lost children. Much like the holy family of old, Palestinian families of today have had to flee home. Only now, there is no safe place to go.

A ceasefire would mean an end to the slaughter of innocents by weapons. It would not end the more insidious slaughter of children being perpetrated through starvation and the destruction of medical systems, but it would be a start. We in this country have the power to stop the flow of weapons and the leverage to stop the use of weapons. To demand this individually and collectively is righteousness. For it to truly happen would be the first step towards justice, and so the first step onto the way of peace. #ceasfirenow

“He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.”—Isaiah 2:4

Advent, Day 13—December 13, 2024

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is often brought up as the goal of conflict resolution. It is also often criticized as a goal because it is not always best to seek to bring perpetrators and survivors back together. It can be seen as trying to restore the perpetrator without taking into full account the needs of the survivor. The problem is not reconciliation itself, though; it is rushed reconciliation and forced reconciliation. True reconciliation is a powerful and important process of peace.

Reconciliation means to bring back into alignment or right relationship that which has been misaligned or torn asunder. Reconciliation is no simple thing. It requires: 1) acknowledgement of harm caused, whether individually or mutually, 2) action to repair what was broken, and 3) a freely-made decision of forgiveness. Let's break those down a little bit. Acknowledgement of harm caused should be clear, to the point, and unequivocal—none of this, “I’m sorry that you feel this way,” and lots of this, “I’m sorry that I did _____,” and, “I see that my action caused harm in this way.” Action to repair what was broken means making reparations. Reparations can take different forms—money, land, and other resources to compensate for lost or stolen resources or labor; implementation of skills and completion of tasks to build up communities; asking the other party what they need and then doing that or providing that. Forgiveness as a decision freely made means that we should not mandate or even expect forgiveness. We should, however, be open to the possibility of forgiving if we are the harmed party and the preceding process of acknowledging and reparation has occurred.

After all, there is incredible transformative power in reconciliation for those

involved and for the world beyond. Such is the promise of our faith! Relationships can be made right again. Realignment can occur. Together, we can even move beyond into something better.

“If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them.”—Luke 17:3

Advent, Day 14—December 14, 2024

Serenity

I am blessed beyond measure to have a sister named Serenity. So, I get to hear that beautiful word often, just as I get to hear *her* beautiful words often! So, this brilliant, energetic wonder of life is my first association with the word serenity. For many others, their first association with that word is the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” A version of it was first written by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and it has been a mainstay at twelve-step meetings since the forties. It is a powerful prayer, and it captures the essence of serenity well—the calm that can only come from knowing what is within our power to do and what is not within our power to do, and then only trying to do what is within our power. That is also the essence of much of what we strive for in mental health work. Most of us would feel a lot better if we would spend our time and energy on that which is within our control to address.

Serenity can be thought of as inner peace. This has been the week of our peace candle, and it is fitting that we should end with inner peace. I hope that many of us have had tastes of inner peace in this life, those moments when we feel our spirits at ease, when we encounter the presence of the holy. We should strive for these moments in our spiritual practices, in our time spent with loved ones, and in our acts of revolution. I don't think we can truly feel inner peace in its fullness, though, until we achieve peace with our neighbors and peace in this world. For, all realms of peace are interdependent and inter-dynamic. My peace depends on your peace, depends on peace for those who are suffering most in

this world.

Back to that idea of focusing on what is within our control, we may sometimes feel powerless to do anything about the suffering of others far away. We can always do something, though! We can organize. We can advocate. We can protest. We can pray. We can send healing energy out there. We can use our power and privilege to change policy. We can write letters. We can educate others. We can open our homes. We can open our hearts. Yes, we always have at least some power. The key is doing what we can as much as we can. For, in seeking the peace of the world we will assuredly encounter the holy. We will assuredly meet the Prince of Peace. We will assuredly experience serenity.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”—John 14:27
