

*A Place for Peace*

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 3:1-12

To the light of hope, we add the light of peace - and we read about John the Baptizer, who is the definition of someone who disturbed the peace.

Just pretend that John might come walking down the center aisle this morning, dressed in camel hair coat - and I don't mean a blazer from Brooks Brothers.

He is playing prophet - quoting Isaiah about preparing the way and baptizing the people who turned from their wicked ways and telling all the people to get ready because the end was near.

Not really - if the end is near, there is no point in preparing. He was telling them to get ready because the beginning was coming. The kingdom of heaven was at hand. The rule of God was closer than they thought. They needed to loosen their grip on all the things they held so tightly about what the kingdom would look like, so that they could grasp what was already coming their way.

So why was John's kind of peace so disturbing? Other than the fact that they had to give up their grasp on peace and go to a different place to get his.

Maybe the reason John might bother us a bit in the center aisle doesn't have that much to do with the buzzing grasshoppers, wild honey, and the stinking camel skin. Maybe his ideas of peace and our ideas of peace are just different. After all, we might think that someone is a slithering snake, a high and mighty low-life. But we would never say it to their face!

Peace and quiet! That's what we like. We believe that peace is quiet - not causing trouble, not shaking things up, not confronting problems. We believe that peace is smoothing things over, playing nice, everyone hearing the harmony - and if you singing off key, please don't sing at all. Peace is quiet - even if no one gets to sing.

Keeping the peace. We believe that peace is appeasement - doing what you have to do to make everyone happy or at least the right people happy, avoiding confrontation, leaving things unsaid. Keeping things the way they are is better than a disturbance that will only make things worse.

Know what I mean? Of course you do.

Maybe you deal with family this way? Tension is just part of what you brace yourself for in the holidays, and it is better to ignore problems and get through it peacefully.

Maybe we all see peace this way on the global scene. We want world leaders to have their summit meetings and sit around the table and shake hands at the end - whether or not the words ever change anything - so long as we keep our tight hold on the peace we already have.

Maybe we keep peace by pretending that there aren't any problems. Churches are really good at avoiding problems that are under the surface until someone says something out loud or

something happens - like maybe some financial problem - that brings one of the issues to the surface. It's like murdering the prince, and a world war breaks out. All the buried conflict comes to the surface. I've known a few churches like this. ... Have you? Of course you have. We think it is more peaceful to keep our conflicts in the church closet, and we walk by the door Sunday after Sunday, and we don't even look in the direction of the door knob.

John comes telling the high and the low that they need to repent, to turn around and get ready for the new rule of God in the world. In Advent, we are called to play John the Baptizer to prepare a way straight to heart of right living. We are called to prune away the things in our lives, our church, and our community that rob us of the energy and vitality we need to produce good fruit. John calls us to clean up the harvest of our past that we have stored on the threshing floor (or in the church closet), and throw out the things that don't do us or anyone else any good.

Peace is preparing the way - and making the path straight.

Peace is bearing good fruit - and pruning the tree to get it.

Peace is cleaning the threshing floor - and separating wheat from chaff.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus says "blessed are the peace-makers." He does not say, the "peace-keepers." There is a difference, and the difference is the lesson of the candle we light this morning.

Peace-keeping assumes there already is a peace to keep, and we don't want to do anything to disturb it. Jesus says these people are always crying "peace, peace" when there is no peace. They are peace-keepers. What God needs is some peace-making. Like John, Jesus knew all the prophets of the Old Testament. He knew that peace is doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly.

So the first thing we can do to spread the light of peace into places is admit that most places don't have much peace. We need to bring God's peace to them.

How do we do bring God's peace to places where we know peace is needed?

Being honest with each other and open to listen to the other's viewpoint is a beginning. And taking a lesson from John, saying the obvious out loud can be the start of a straight road instead of a curved diversion we sometimes prefer. Remember, John called a few very powerful deceivers snakes, but most of the people went out into the wilderness to hear him because finally there was someone who would shoot straight about the problems in their world and in their lives.

So if you have a problem with someone in this Advent season, why not first be honest with yourself about it and admit that there is not much peace between you. Then find a way to be honest with them about it. Figure out a way to talk with that family member, a fellow worker, a friend who has a problem and a problem with you, a church member who always seems to be on the other side, no matter what the topic is.

And if you are afraid you will kill the tree trying to prune it, it is a good idea *not* to use an ax. Ask someone who knows more about pruning before you start whacking away. If it is something really serious and you just don't know how to deal with it, then give yourself an

Advent present and get some help. See a counselor, call the Kilgore Center, get the advice of someone who knows more more about pruning problems than you do.

Just remember: Advent is a time of preparing a way, not just sitting and waiting for a problem of peace to go away. Advent is for making the path straight. Avoidance and denial do not get you down that road very far. It is hard to make progress toward peace when we sit and do nothing but think about it.

Now before we go making peace and thinking the other person is the problem, just a word of warning here. The song that plays on our church carillon regularly says, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." None of us eat grasshoppers and honey and wear camel hair. We don't play John the Baptizer very well. So, before we go telling other people how they ought to repent, it might be a good idea to move toward making some peace with ourselves, peace in our own lives.

Take some time this Advent to think about how you can prepare a place for peace by changing some patterns in your own ways. Jesus does say that it is hard to see the problems of others when we have that flaw in our eyes that blinds our vision.

You can do some deep soul-searching and some desperate praying. But you can also just admit to yourself some obvious flaws in your attitudes or behaviors or patterns with others that help make your relationships more complicated than they need to be. This Advent, in the light of the hope Christ has already given and the place of peace he promises, just focus on that one obvious flaw that makes you hard to live with sometimes, and give yourself and someone else the gift of peace.

What would happen if you asked someone you love to help you with the flaw that makes you harder to love?

What would happen if you just admitted to someone at work or at church or at wherever that you were hard to get along with sometimes, or - heaven help us - that we might admit that we are not always right?

What would happen to the church closet if we all admitted that there was something in there that we put in there, and we need to clean up our own mess before we blame other people for the mess? What would happen if we all decided to gather at the door of the church closet and ask Christ to help us and had enough faith to let him open the door. Surely, with Christ standing there with us, it could never be as bad as our imaginations and fears have made us think.

Yes, peace is not really something we already have. Peace is a place we look for, search for, and when we hope for, we move toward. Remember last week. Hope is a time that in the future, so peace is a place of promise that we move toward.

We really don't have as much peace as we think - when we think of peace the way Christ thinks of peace. More than likely we are really getting further away from the place of peace, because we are moving in the wrong direction. We need to turn around and move a different direction to get to the place of God's peace.

Jesus told his followers, "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. Do not let them be afraid."

It is like we said: if we think peace is quiet, then we think peace is peace-keeping. That will never work because we can never keep what we don't have yet. We have to let go of the delusion of peace and reach out for the dream of divine peace.

For all his show to get their attention, John the Baptizer's message was pretty simple: The hope and peace, the love and joy of God's salvation is closer than we think. In fact, if we just stop in our tracks long enough to see what a twisted road we have chosen to walk, surely we would choose to turn around and walk the straight road that Christ has prepared for all of us - that leads to the place of HIS peace.

Now that we have lit the candle and peace is shining among us, let's try passing the peace one more time.

"In a world of terror and turmoil the promise of Christ's forgiveness is peace.

"The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." ... Amen.