

Sermon for December 4, 2016 – “A Message of Peace”

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A – Text: Matthew 3:1-12

There he was, seemingly out of nowhere, strange clothing, stranger diet. Long, scraggly hair, long, scraggly beard. I’m not talking about one of the guys on “Duck Dynasty”, although he’d fit right in with the Robertson boys – Willie, Phil and Uncle Si. No, I’m talking about John the Baptist. He must’ve been a sight to behold, and that was before he’d even opened his mouth. Sounding like your typical “doom and gloom” prophet, there he was crying out in the wilderness: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” “Repent, for every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “Repent, for after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”** Repent. Repent. Repent. Okay, so here we are on the second Sunday of Advent. The Sunday of Peace when we light the candle of peace. Here we are reading the prescribed lectionary text whose sole message is, lest there be any doubt, Repent!

Umm...okay, but here’s my question..What’s the connection between John, his message of repentance, and peace? **Is** there a connection? I believe there is. In fact, I’m of the opinion that John’s message was (and is) one of peace. What’s more, I’d say that it’s a message that the world desperately needs to hear! But, one might say, who wants to be told that they need to repent? Ever try to tell someone that they need to change something about themselves? How do we react when someone says that we’re doing something completely wrong and need to make a few changes? That we need to do a 180 degree about face? So, how do we think people would react to hearing that they’re sinners and need to repent? Even if doing so will bring them peace and help make them better. On the other hand, isn’t it also true that this message is exactly what a lot of people really need to hear? Think of some of the more high-profile politicians, business leaders, entertainers, you know, professional sinners. Those who’ve turned sinning into an art form. But not just them, I’ve a feeling that we all know someone who needs to hear that message. Friends, people in our own families, unhappy, hurting people. People who desperately need to know peace in their lives. People either chasing after something that they think will bring them the peace they so desperately seek or who seem to have given up altogether on the notion of ever finding it.

Peace is something we all seek. At the same time, we often have a bit of a problem getting there, especially if repentance is involved. And wouldn’t you know, “repent” is central to John’s message of peace. Peace and being in a right relationship with God. Two things which, as I see it, are so intricately linked that you can’t have one without the other. Think of how elusive peace is. Think of how far away the Kingdom of Heaven seems at times. There’s no peace in the Middle East, or in parts of Africa. There’s been no war to end all wars, not yet, anyway. Sad to say, there’s never a time when there’s been no war or conflict. Then again, peace isn’t merely the absence of war or conflict. Think of our homes, our own families, or those of our closest friends. Think of what we’ve seen, what we’ve experienced. Think of the people who live in fear, those who do all sorts of self-destructive things. Think, too, of all the places, the ones we know and the ones we don’t talk about, where there’s violence or neglect. Right now there is no peace in the hearts of literally millions of people.

But there **can** be. When we look hard enough. It’s there if we’ve eyes to see. It’s pretty rare, but it is there. We see nations without civil wars or violent oppression within. We see nations reasonably well run, far from perfect, but that run (more or less) according to the rule of law. And though they’re few and far between, we see individuals, even entire families living in peace even in the midst of hardship, or grief. What’s their secret? How do we get there?

Well, as far as the world goes, it seems to me that peace doesn't come from treaties or alliances. Nor, apparently, does it come by fighting for peace, though for a short time these things may seem to work. No, peace obtained these ways seems to last only briefly because in no time, what happens? Well what happens is that our hunger, our desire, our anxiety arises once again, our inner and outer conflicts return. This is why Peace comes, can only come, through repentance. Peace comes with turning towards God and following Christ, or to use the highway image that both Isaiah and John the Baptist use so often, by preparing the way for the coming of the Promised One. It really is that simple.

In Isaiah, chapter thirty-two, verse 17, it says this: **“The fruit of righteousness will be peace. The effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.”** What the prophet is saying is that the product of our relationship with God is peace, a peace for the heart and mind. But there's more as it says in the very next verse: **“My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.”** The fruit of righteousness is peace. That's the fruit of following Christ, that which results, from being grafted into His vine it grows out of us. Not because of something special about **us**, but because of something special about **God**. The good news, the gospel, began before Jesus arrived on the scene. It began with John the Baptist. And, John's message was received with the same great joy that the message of Jesus was received with.

John was the one spoken of by Isaiah. He was the voice crying in the wilderness **“prepare the way of the Lord!”** **“Make His paths straight!”** And people heard John this way. They saw **him** as the promised one. The one who was to come before the Messiah, so they went out to him in the wilderness. Out to him from Jerusalem, Judea and the region around the Jordan and they listened to his message. They responded to his call, and by the thousands they were baptized for the forgiveness of sins. **“I tell you,”** said Jesus later on, **“that among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist...”** And why is this? Why this praise? Sometimes I wonder, and I think that there are times when we really don't quite know what to make of John and his message. At best, John's always seemed, well, strange, almost out of place in the gospel narrative. He often ends up reminding us of the cartoons we've seen. The ones with the crazy-looking character standing on a street corner waving a “repent, the end is near” sign. John seems scary telling people that they're a brood of vipers, that the axe of judgment is even now being laid to the roots of their lives, and anyone not producing good fruit gets cut down and tossed into the fire. Yikes! And yet thousands heard his message that the kingdom of God was near, thousands responded to his call to repent of their sins, thousands were baptized, in preparation to welcome the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah.

So, what're we missing here in our picture of John? What's missing in our picture of what he did and said as he spoke of repentance and, perhaps more importantly, the one to come after him? I don't want to belabor any points today, but I think what we're missing is the marvel of what John called the people of Israel to receive as they came out to him at the Jordan. We tend not to hear John's message as one of peace. We find it hard to get past that whole “repent” thing. But why? If we all seek peace – in our lives, homes, and churches – why? John called people to be ready for the coming of Christ, by letting go of their burdens and receiving the forgiveness of God. John told all who came to him that they could get a fresh start in life, that they could begin again as newly washed individuals, pure and holy in God's eyes, That the Messiah was coming, to save them as the prophets of old (including Isaiah) had promised. John proclaimed the love of God. The forgiveness God. Indeed, even the peace of God. John proclaimed the day of God's coming. What's more, he made this personal by offering that love and forgiveness to all those who came to him and entered the river with him.

What John proclaimed gave people hope, the hope that peace in their lives was possible. That the past can be forgotten, that it can be washed away, and when the new comes, when God comes, we can meet Him and stand before Him without fear. That is indeed a message of peace. It was only the Pharisees and Sadducees that saw it as anything else; as a word of criticism. And rightly so. It should not be so with us. It **must** not be so. It is, for God's people, a word of opportunity. It's a way into God's planned future. It's a reconciliation. A renewal of our relationship with God. It's a new beginning in our relationships with each other. It's a message of peace. It's a trailer for the One to whom he pointed. The One whose way John was preparing. One whose sandals John wasn't fit to carry. One more powerful – the Prince of Peace.

Peace in forgiveness. Peace in a new life. Peace in a new heaven and a new earth. And here's the thing, last week, we spoke of hope. We talked about how we must keep awake, waiting in hopeful expectation because the fulfillment of God's promises could happen at **any** time. That it has, in fact, already begun. Today I tell you as we wait that it's important that we not only keep our eyes open, but our hearts and minds as well. Today I tell you that we must understand, and take seriously, the notion of repentance seeing it not as a burden, or something to fear. But as the key to finding peace...

Today I tell you that we must take stock of our lives as a prelude to taking ownership of those parts of us that we'd just as soon not admit exist. Today I tell you that we must not only recognize what God **has** done, **is** doing, and **will** do, but that we be willing to confess our need for God. That we vow to turn ourselves around and accept from His hands the forgiveness being offered, the new life that is available to us. In the end it's what we all need and what we all want, and it's what John pointed to as he spoke in the wilderness of the one who was to come after him, Jesus the Christ.

Let those who have ears, hear His word... Let every heart prepare Him room... Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.