

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

2. Peace

Luke 1: 67-79

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We are thinking during this Advent series of messages about the “signs of the times” that we find in the promise of hope, peace, joy and love--the traditional sign posts of Advent. Last week, we examined the sign post of hope and I suggested that if hope is to be matter, if it is to be more than merely wishful thinking, then it must be incarnational—that is, it must be made flesh in the words that we speak and the action that we take.

This morning, we have lit the second candle of Advent, the candle of peace. Peace, of course, is a very popular Advent / Christmas theme. Our gospel lesson from Luke features what is known as the “Benedictus,” the hymn of thanksgiving and praise that erupted from the lips of Zechariah upon the birth of his son, John—the one who would become known as the “Baptizer.” In this psalm of thanksgiving, Zechariah expresses his gratitude to God for the fact that his son, John, will be **“called prophet of the Most High” who will “go before the (coming) Lord to prepare his ways.”**

The Benedictus comes to its conclusion with the inspiring vision of the coming day when,

“By the tender mercy of 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 in the way of peace.”

In preparing the way for the One who comes, we do so by lighting a candle to celebrate the fact that he will “guide our feet in the way of peace.” In the wake of all that has been taking place in our world as of late—from the attacks in Paris, the shootings in San Bernardino, and the day to day violence on the streets of our cities—we realize just how great is our need for the One who will “guide our feet in the way of peace.” For, clearly, we have lost our way as the cycle of violence only seems to escalate.

This, of course, is the time of year in which we speak of peace and pray for peace and proclaim “peace on earth” in the cards that we send. We dream Isaiah’s dream of the day in which the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and they will not hurt or destroy on all God’s holy mountain. Yet, we have to ask, “Are we kidding ourselves to think that this is really a possibility?”

I cannot help but smile at Woody Allen’s realistic revision of the Isaiah’s dream of the lion and the lamb lying down together. He said, “The lion and the lamb will lie down together, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.”

Indeed, the lamb won’t get much sleep in a world in which the powerful are always ready to pounce upon the powerless, a world in which the strong are always trying to take advantage of the weak.

Given this reality, it can be rather easy to arrive at the conclusion that peace is simply not possible—that, while it is a noble idea, it is, essentially a foolish fantasy, a fairytale that cannot come true. Better to adjust to the reality of the way things are, this thinking goes, than to live in the dream world of what can never be.

While I understand this perspective, I also believe that it overlooks one important and vital bit of information. Peace is not impossible. In fact, it is quite possible if we are willing to make it personal, that is, if we are willing to make the fundamental choice to practice peace personally in the way that we think, the words that we speak and the actions that we take. Peace is possible, without question, if we choose to make it personal and if we choose to make it a priority. The problem is too many people are not willing to make that choice or carry out that commitment.

William Gladstone observed that “the love of power” too often negates the “power of love.” And we can observe this tendency not only on the international and national stage, but upon the stage in which we live out the drama of our everyday lives. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that it is upon this stage—the stage of the personal perspectives and individual choices that we make—that the real hope for peace in our world can be cultivated.

Put another way, peace must be won within before it can ever be established without. Unless we are at peace within ourselves, there is no hope for peace beyond ourselves.

So allow me to ask on this second Sunday of Advent: **Are you at peace?** My guess would be that the answer, at least for some of us, would be, “not exactly.” For the fact is inward peace often proves to be rather elusive. We may project a calm exterior and even a placid personality, but that does not mean there is no conflict within us. That does not mean that we don’t feel a certain restlessness, a certain uneasiness, a certain anxiousness deep within ourselves. The reasons for our unrest can be many and varied.

They may reside in our inability to be satisfied with what we have and our tendency to envy others who have what we do not. In a culture of commercialism, we are continually bombarded with the message that we will only be happy when we acquire what we don’t have. And that message leaves us restless and dissatisfied.

Our unrest may reside in our fear of losing out in the competitive world of which we are a part. This may include the fear of not being good enough, the fear of not be included, the fear of being left behind in the race for the good life.

Our unrest may also be linked to our struggle to determine and define the values and the principles by which we choose to live. As people of faith, we are aware that we are called to live by a different set of values—values that place others before ourselves, that do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. How in the world do we do that in the midst of a culture that advocates just the opposite?

It is not easy, you see, to experience peace within ourselves. The conflicts are real and the challenges are great. But, if we are willing to do the important “inner work” of examining

ourselves and our motives, if we are willing to reflect upon the ways in which we allow our fear and our ego to have the upper hand, if we are willing to let go of our need to be in control and to have our way, then the seed of peace will find the nourishing soil that it needs to put down roots and grow within us.

There is the song that we sometimes sing that provides the critical perspective: “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” This is not just an idle phrase, but one that, I believe, provides the foundation upon which we can build the outward framework of peace. If peace is at all possible, it must begin with you and it must begin with me. It must begin in our willingness to do the hard and difficult work of making peace by setting aside our egos and our points of view as we listen to and learn from the perspectives of others.

Note that, in the Beatitudes, Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the peace wishers...or, blessed are the peace hoppers.” No, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peace makers.” We are called to “make peace,” through our willingness to “begin within” by challenging and changing our own prejudices and fears, our self-centeredness and our pursuit of privilege and power. We can never hope to wage peace internationally if we are not willing, first of all, to wage peace personally—within our hearts and our minds.

Are you willing to do that this morning? Are you willing to look within at those attitudes and actions that are grounded in fear, envy, prejudice and pride? Are you willing to do the hard work of “calling yourself on the carpet” and holding yourself accountable to a higher standard and a greater good? Are you willing to let peace begin with you by making needed choices and changes to reflect your desire for peace?

It was John Lennon, the former Beatle, who observed wryly that, “**If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there would be peace.**” He had a point. We have to want peace enough to set our need desires, our comforts and our conveniences, aside. We have to want peace enough to truly work for it, to truly make it our priority and our passion. What the world needs now, more than at any other time before, is the commitment of those in every nation who will allow peace-making to be their passionate purpose.

That then, is your assignment, should you choose to accept it—to become passionate makers of peace. In Jesus, the One who comes to “guide our feet in the way of peace,” we have the role model that we need. For, Jesus is the one who models for us what it means to make peace. In his word and in his witness, we see what the choice to “make peace” looks like in every day terms. We see the impact that peace can make in a conflicted world. And we see the courage and the conviction needed to make it possible.

So it is that I would like to invite you, this morning, to make it your resolve to let peace begin with you...

- **Let it begin with your attitude toward yourself and your willingness to engage in the inner work of peace.**

- **Let it begin with you and your attitude towards others; your willingness to listen and to learn, to enter into their pain and share their hurt and their hope.**
- **Let it begin with you and your witness to the world; your willingness to counter fear with hope, to allow the power of love to overcome the love of power.**

Peace is possible...if we are willing to make it personal...if we are willing to make it our priority...if we are willing to let it begin within, here and now. Amen