

How Can We Prepare Space for Peace?

What a gift it is to be gathered today via live stream and in this house of worship on land which has been loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we hope will be loved long into the future. As we move deeper into the Advent season, scriptures beckons us to pause and reflect upon deep truths of our faith.

Last Sunday, the theme of **hope** invited us to wonder if we plant seeds of hope. Next Sunday, the theme of **joy** will invite us to wonder what sparks our joy. Today, the theme of **peace** invites us to wonder how we can prepare space in our lives for peace. Let's open this time of reflection with words of prayer: God of all and God with us, Emmanuel – come sit with us for a little while. As we move deeper into your Advent and toward the light of Christmas Day, further open our hearts and minds to a new arrival of your Christ Light changing the ways we live. Amen.

Fellow followers of Jesus, how much peace do we experience in our lives? Merriam Webster Dictionary (which I love) defines peace in this way: *“a state of tranquility or quiet, freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, harmony in relationships.”* On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not a trace of peace and 10 being sublime peacefulness, how much peace do you experience on a day to day basis? I'll share those again: *“a state of tranquility or quiet, freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, and harmony in relationships.”*

Our scripture readings for today present two messengers who invite us to wonder about both inner peace and relational peace. John the Baptist invites us to clear space for peace through transformation and St. Paul encourages us to maintain that space by living as transformed people.

Before zeroing in on their messages, let's start 600 years earlier and also fast forward to today. Christians have often leaned into Luke's understanding that the words he quotes from Isaiah refer to John the Baptist, cousin to Jesus. While the people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon in the 6th century BCE, Isaiah wrote of the Word of God coming through a messenger in the wilderness extolling the people to prepare for God's coming. Many people have spoken, written and lived messages from the heart of God coming across time. Some messengers have been charismatic, seemingly larger-than-life heroes, martyrs, and civic leaders. Many have been ordinary people whose lives are less widely noticed but whose impacts have been deep.

I wonder: In your life, who has been a messenger from the fathomless and expansive, life-affirming love of God? What particular message have you witnessed that person bearing? **And what if you are God's messenger to someone with whom your path intersects?** What message do you bear? Do you model and invite peace?

I invite us to hold an open, honest, wondering posture this morning in regard to God's messengers. Let's mindfully hold space especially for the messages that affirm the integrity and beauty of life and our capacity to embody love – thereby supporting us in preparing space for deep tranquility and harmony in relationships.

As those questions percolate, let's wonder how the gospel message and the messages we each carry do or do not prepare a way for God's incarnation in Jesus and, more broadly, for embodiment of God's love everywhere.

We can shift to today's reading from the gospel of Luke. We heard, "[T]he word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The word “repentance” in its original Greek, *metanoia*, means a transformative change of heart. Meta means “after” or “change.” Please say that with me – *metanoia. Metanoia.* Transformative change of heart – *meta* means after or change. And we know from our sacred Scriptures that John the baptizer, indeed, became *“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

I challenge you to wonder: Who or what is the God whose message you carry to others as a potential source and guide for human life? This passage is not about God or God’s messengers making it easy for God to pass through our human lives. God is not a power-over kind of ruler who seeks to ride on a motorcade, passing through town on Main Street, beaming as though all is well in the world. No, God is empowering Love who came to be revealed in a poor baby, born to people oppressed by an occupying military government. We don’t see our God riding smoothly along in a motorcade; we see God born in a feeding trough.

Hear again these words in light of the nature of that God we worship: *“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”* These words are partly about the hard work that we, as disciples of Christ, must do to create an opening – a way for God to be welcome and recognized in our lives. I believe these words are also about the reversals that Jesus came to teach us about – God’s justice revealed as the oppressed and downcast rise up and those who are not oppressed and downcast coming alongside and partner with those who are oppressed. Being co-creators of salvation is our theme for next week when we will light the candle of joy.

Earlier I named that, on this second Sunday in Advent, the theme of peace invites us to wonder what messages we are hearing and carrying and to mindfully hold space for the messages that are true in the sense that they affirm the integrity and beauty of life and our capacity to embody love.

I recently glimpsed on my office bookshelf of a devotional book by Beth A. Richardson entitled *The Uncluttered Heart: Making Room for God During Advent and Christmas*. I will be honest in saying that I have not yet read the book. I venture to suppose that we all have a lot of spiritual uncluttering to do in our hearts if we are to make enough room for Jesus to be lord (that is, sovereign or ultimate influence) in our lives, influencing the way we see and care for ourselves and others.

I struggle with peace. It is not the easiest week in Advent for me. Inner peace and peace in relationships are difficult work. And I want to share with you a very brief entry I wrote while on my reading retreat (the way I utilized my continuing education time this fall. I was at ARC Retreat Community in Stanchfield. I wrote this:

“I sat on a rough-hewn bench, facing the creek – the Lower Stanchfield Branch. I felt the sun glowing on my eyelids. And I simply felt goodness. As I entered the labyrinth, I asked [with all my heart and all my soul]: What would it look like for me to let go while also moving with care? Be here now. That was the answer that came.” Practicing presence with ourselves and one another is so, so vital. And as I shared that insight that I had in my body, mind and spirit; others reminded me that Ram Dass made that a popular saying some decades ago and that Buddhism and other spiritual paths know how to practice being here now.

Perhaps how hard we work to prepare for the arrival of a person or an experience in our lives demonstrates how much we care about that person or experience in our striving for relational peace. If Jesus as the ultimate embodiment of the love of God is sovereign in our lives and the way he taught us to live is the way we long to follow, does our preparatory behavior carry that message to others?

Let's hear for a moment from the Apostle Paul some encouragement about how to live in this way of preparation. We hear, *"As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you."* St. Paul, in so many of his writings, challenges and encourages us toward lives of integrity. What we see and absorb, heard and absorb, and know is from the way of God – we are to emulate and continue.

In closing, **I wonder: What if you are God's messenger of transformation to someone with whom your path intersects?** What if John the Baptist was not the final fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that a messenger from God would remind people of our ongoing need for *metanoia* – transformation of our hearts? Let's go forth from this moment of reflection toward deeper and fuller inner peace and relational peace, hearing once again from our brother in faith: *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* Let us be messengers and bearer of that peace, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Philippians 4:2-9, Luke 3:1-6