

SERMON TITLE: "The Way of Peace"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 1:57-58, 67-79
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 6, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember back in March when the pandemic first started affecting us, and we were having strange experiences? We couldn't sleep, and when we did, we had weird dreams. We stocked up on groceries and then ate them like we were starving. Even though we didn't yet know anyone who was sick or dying, we were suddenly thrown into a state of high alert, if not panic. Some of those bizarre symptoms of shock have worn off over these nine months, but our initial reaction to the threat of the coronavirus has now given way to a constant state of daily trauma in which we name the growing number of people we know and love who have gotten ill and some who have died. And we face the everyday and very-real possibility that we could become infected or infect someone else with serious sickness before we all arrive at that post-vaccination safe zone sometime next year.

Psychologists talk about the damaging effects on the human psyche when there is a perception of constant trauma or threat. The feeling of being under siege is hard on us. That's why our bodies, as well as our minds and souls, so desperately long for peace. Every year, the second candle on our Advent wreath reminds us of the importance of peace. But this year, maybe more than most, we need God to help us find "the way of peace."

Our scripture text this morning is about the birth of John the Baptist. You know that John was the slightly-older cousin of Jesus, who called people to repentance and baptism along the Jordan River. John's message prepared them to hear and follow Jesus. In this passage from Luke 1, we hear John's father Zechariah speaking some prophetic words about the ministry of salvation and peace that is coming. Let's zero in on his message and see what Zechariah meant. Maybe, then, we too can be guided into the way of peace.

1—SAVED FROM OUR ENEMIES

In Zechariah's poetic prophesy, he indicated at least three different aspects of the peace God has in store for us. The first one is probably the most obvious. In verse 71, we see that God's desire is "that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us."

Human enemies who want to cause hurt and destruction have been a problem since the time of Adam and Eve, when their son Cain killed his brother Abel. Throughout the ages, murderers, gangs, tribes, makeshift militias, and organized armies have wreaked havoc on God's people. Of course, "enemies" don't have to be the hand-to-hand-combat kind. They can be the con artists and scammers who try to snare us in financial traps by calling our phones and sending us emails. They can be family and friends who take advantage of our kindness. Or they can be the bad actors who try to manipulate our thinking with false information on social media. Our "enemies" can also be less-tangible situations like relationship struggles, employment stress, self-esteem issues, physical or mental health problems, debt and poverty, addictions, and more. Anything that wears us down and steals life and joy from us can be an enemy.

So, how can God guide our feet into the way of peace in regard to these enemies? Decades ago when I was going through a tough time in my life, I went to a mental health professional who happened to be a Catholic nun. Because she could see that I was a religious person, she asked me if I "prayed the Psalms." A little puzzled, I said, "No, I don't *pray* the Psalms; I *read* the Psalms." Then she explained to me that the Psalms, which are the ancient Jewish hymnal, are also full of prayers. She advised me to go home and read the Psalms, using those words as my own words of prayer.

So I gave it a try. All was well with the happy psalms that lift praises to God. But when I got to those psalms that asked God to kill or destroy my enemies, I was concerned. I didn't really want God to kill anyone. Besides, I didn't have specific people who were my enemies; for me, it was more like a difficult situation. But, with a little more practice, I began to realize that—every time I came to the word

“enemies” in the Psalms—I could substitute in my particular problem that I definitely wanted God to eliminate from my life. Praying the Psalms really did help me find the way of peace, as it affirmed for me that God cared about me, that God’s strength was there for me, and that, yes, indeed, God would be able to save me from my enemies.

2—FORGIVEN OF OUR SINS

A second way of peace in Zechariah’s prophecy is that we can be forgiven of our sins. We see this in verses 77 and 78. Due to the “tender mercy of God,” we can be relieved of guilt for our wrong thoughts, words, and deeds. Of course, forgiveness isn’t only about the removal of consequences for our sins. The mercy of God doesn’t just clean us up so we can go out and sin again. According to verses 74 and 75, God’s forgiveness that brings peace to our hearts and minds sets us free from the enemy of sin *so that* we can live in holiness and righteousness all our days. That doesn’t mean that we never make a mistake ever again, but it does indicate the power of God’s forgiveness. It’s not only a medicine that cures the sickness we have had; it’s also like a vaccine that helps prevent future infections.

When we receive such gracious forgiveness, it instills peace in our hearts. When we have confidence that we are living according to God’s holiness, we no longer have to fear the judgement of God or other people.

I want to point out, however, that this forgiveness of God and the holy living it encourages isn’t just an individual salvation. In the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, the words that are translated “righteousness” also mean “justice.” Holy living isn’t only about individual behaviors that we do or don’t do with our bodies. Holy living is also about the salvation of our society. We can’t be righteous without caring about justice for the homeless, the working poor, LGBTQ folks, racial minorities, migrants fleeing death in their home countries, and those with physical and mental disabilities. Without justice in our society, there can be no peace. God’s way of peace includes the compassionate forgiveness of sins that offers salvation and justice for all.

3—CALLED TO SERVE GOD

Because of that larger-society understanding of salvation, the way of peace also means that we are called to serve God by sharing the way of peace with others. In verse 76, Zechariah is speaking of his newborn son John, who will be called to serve God as “the prophet of the Most High” who “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” In other words, John would be called to serve God by ministering to his people and sharing with them the message of the Lord.

It makes sense that John would be called to serve God in that way, since John’s parents were already devout servants of God themselves. Earlier in Luke, we are told that Zechariah took his turns serving as a priest at the temple. We are also told how Elizabeth offered beautiful, reassuring, and encouraging words of blessing to her young relative Mary in regard to her pregnancy. Luke 1:58 indicates that Zechariah and Elizabeth were people who lived in a community with neighbors and relatives who rejoiced with them in the birth of their son John. Zechariah and Elizabeth weren’t people who kept their faith in God to themselves. They knew that God had called them to be a part of something much bigger. They had roles to play in the salvation that God was bringing to their people. The way of peace for them definitely included the fact that they were called to serve God.

And that’s true for us today, as well. One of the most beneficial aspects of our Christian faith is the sense of calling and purpose God gives us. While we might have uncertainty about many things, there is no doubt that God is calling us to participate in service to the congregation, the community, and the world around us. Through prayer for one another, through encouraging communication, through teaching and study, through mission projects near and far—we join together as the body of Christ, doing the work of God. Each of us brings our own talents and perspectives to this purpose, as God calls us to use those abilities that we have been given. When we do so, we gain confidence, happiness, and satisfaction. While John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, we are the disciples who follow. Because we are called by God, we find for ourselves, and guide others into, the way of peace.

CONCLUSION

Have you seen the television advertisement where the mother comes home to find her husband and children hanging decorations on the Christmas tree by using a radio-controlled drone? As soon as she steps into that chaos, she immediately turns around and goes back outside. She climbs back into her car and relaxes while listening to music. I don't remember what kind of car it was, but it was advertised as being a "sanctuary."

Call me biased, but I think there's another kind of sanctuary that's a lot better. Sure, it's true that we all need those times and places of solitude in which we can get away from the chaos, the anxiety, and the danger. But the way of peace won't come from any automobile. The sanctuary that comes from God is the way of peace that will save us from our enemies, forgive our sins so we can live in holy justice, and call us to serve God with the divine purpose that truly satisfies. So, during this Advent and Christmas season, as we hear the angels proclaiming "peace on earth," let's allow God to guide our feet into this way of peace.