

SERMON TITLE: "The Way of Peace"

SERMON TEXT: Luke 1:67-79

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: December 10, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

Last Sunday we talked about hope, and what might be acceptable things to hope for. Today, our Advent theme is peace. Our scripture reading from Luke indicates that this theme was very much on the mind of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When John was born, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and uttered these important words. Because our worship hour is busy today, I'll keep this short. But I want us to look at what Zechariah said, so that we might be guided in the way of peace.

### **1—THE WAY OF PEACE COMES IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLE**

Let's begin with what seems most obvious. The way of peace comes in the midst of trouble. Zechariah's prophecy mentions enemies, hatred, fears, sins, darkness, and death. Just like there is trouble in the Middle East today, there was trouble in the Middle East at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus' births. Back then, the Jewish people were oppressed by the occupying forces of Rome. Like Jews today, the Jews 2000 years ago believed that God had given them that land and that they ought to be able to live there securely and with liberty. Ironically, though, the Jews of Bible times were also like today's Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank who suffer greatly under Israeli occupation and oppression and wish they could have an independent country of their own. Whatever you make of all that, it's evident that there was and is more than enough trouble in the Middle East.

And, of course, we don't have to just think about the Middle East to recognize the trouble of our human existence. Russia's war on Ukraine is another example. All the news stories about immigration indicate to us that people all over the world are suffering. In our own country, community, in our own families, and even in our own selves, we have trouble too. Our church prayer list is evidence that plenty of troubles abound.

And it is within this pervasive human context of enemies, hatred, fears, sins, darkness, and death that Zechariah imagined a savior would come. Zechariah wasn't trying to discourage his listeners by his long list of grim realities. Rather, he prophesied the *good news* that we don't already have to have solved all our problems or be in a happy place. We don't already have to be living a perfect life to be guided by the way of peace. The way of peace comes to us while we are yet in the midst of trouble.

## **2—THE WAY OF PEACE COMES FROM GOD**

A second important point Zechariah makes in his prophecy is that the way of peace comes from God. In verse 68, Zechariah blesses the Lord God of Israel, who has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. In verse 69, Zechariah announces that God is the one who is raising up a mighty savior. In verses 70-73, Zechariah proclaims that God is the one who has spoken through the prophets of old, God is the one who has promised and shown mercy, and God is the one who has made and remembered a holy covenant with the people. In verse 74, Zechariah says it is God who will rescue the people from their enemies and give them the ability to serve without fear and live in holiness and righteousness. The way of peace comes from the one who is eternal, mighty, and full of tender mercy. The way of peace comes from God, who is able to forgive sins and shine light in the darkness.

Too often, we humans seek peace from other sources. On the negative side, maybe we seek serenity by procrastination, avoidance of necessary conflict, or by drowning our sorrows in alcohol. Many addictions and compulsions begin as some kind of misguided effort to calm and soothe our anxieties. Or maybe we imagine that we can command peace through the domineering strength of a loud voice or by owning guns. Or maybe we think that earning and spending money will insulate us from troubles. Maybe we imagine that a big house in the suburbs, a cabin in the woods, or a boat on the lake might give us the tranquility we're longing for. Or maybe we think that forming the right relationships and spending time with the right people will buffer us from hardships. We suppose that exercising, eating healthful foods, following the doctor's orders, and going to church will give us peace.

Many of those things can help calm our fears, for sure, and I'm all for us doing the good things we can to improve our chances of finding peace. But, even then, troubles can find us—because, ultimately, the way of peace doesn't result from our negative habits or even from our good ones. The reason peace is always possible is that the way of peace comes from God.

### **3—THE WAY OF PEACE CALLS US TO PARTICIPATE**

So, we've established that the way of peace comes to us from God in the midst of trouble. We're struggling, and God comes to the rescue. That's great, right?! End of sermon. Well, not quite. There's something else that Zechariah is trying to tell us here. The way of peace calls us to participate.

At the birth of his son John, Zechariah established not only that God was going to send a savior into the mess of human life, but that God also had a purpose for baby John. As we see in verses 76-77, this child of Zechariah and Elizabeth was called to be a prophet of God who would go before the Lord to prepare his ways. John would do this by giving knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

The way of peace called John *then* and us *today* to participate in the gospel of salvation. Through the forgiveness of our sins, we can be reshaped, renewed, and reformed. We don't see all the details of John the Baptist's message here, but we can find more of it in Luke, chapter three. There John preached about repentance that would be evident in changed behaviors. John challenged those who had two coats to give one away to a person in need. John preached that those who had food should likewise share with the hungry. John told repentant tax collectors to stop collecting more than the tax amount actually due. John instructed repentant soldiers to stop using their authority and weapons to extort money from the people. John even told King Herod to stop committing adultery. That last bit got John killed. But we understand why John said what he did. It was because those who rule shouldn't have unlimited power to take and do whatever they want with whomever they want. Any of us who are truly repentant and seeking forgiveness will accept some regulations on our material wealth and our

exercise of power. We will gladly limit our use of resources and share with those in need. We will be respectful of relationships because the way of peace calls us to participate in a common life and sustainable society with other people.

The other day I read that it would take a median-wage earner more than 17,000 years of work to earn the amount of money that a billionaire has. The person writing the article didn't think it was very fair that one person might possess 17,000 years' worth of money, when there are so many people who can't even afford a home to live in. That's the kind of socioeconomic inequality that revolutions are made of. I'm pretty sure we don't have any billionaires worshiping with us today. But the way of peace calls us to participate in the salvation of our God using whatever resources, wisdom, and voting power we have. The way of peace calls us to participate in shining God's light in the darkness and helping to guide others into the way of peace.

### **CONCLUSION**

I'll wrap up this sermon by describing a cartoon I saw in Friday's *Standard Examiner*. In the one-frame cartoon "Speed Bump," there was a drawing of two individuals sitting at a bar. The man on the left had a martini with an olive on a stick. The customer on the right was not a human, but a dove of peace. Like the man, the dove also had a martini, but inserted into the martini was an olive branch. As an explanation to the man, the dove said, "Well, what else am I supposed to do with an olive branch no one wants?"\*

The dove made an excellent point. The possibility of peace only helps us if we actually apply it. Fortunately, today's scripture helps us imagine how peace is possible. The way of peace comes in the midst of trouble. The way of peace comes from God. And the way of peace calls us to participate.

Let's not stick our olive branches in martinis. Let's join Zechariah, John, and Jesus in guiding ourselves and others into the way of peace.