

*An ADVENTure of Peace*

December 6, 2015 Luke 3:1-6

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Today we are looking for an ADVENTure of Peace. Good luck, Pastor Lesley, you might be thinking. Where in God's name have we seen or felt peace in these last months? It was just 2 months ago I stood up here and asked if we were disturbed enough to care about the Syrian refugee Crisis. Just two weeks ago, in the wake of the Paris bombings, we looked to Jesus to find Truth, truth that assures us not to be afraid, to welcome the stranger, to shelter the homeless refugee. And now today, I find myself entering this pulpit with even more horrific human tragedies to try to address. Another young man gunned down by police, another senseless mass shooting in California, on the same day, another in Savannah. Peace, Pastor? Peace? You've got to be kidding me!

Advent is about waiting and preparing our hearts for the immeasurable gift of God come to earth. The Prince of Peace. So maybe Advent is the perfect time to think about all of this. To ask ourselves, where is peace? How are we peace? How can Advent help us understand and find peace?

In many ways, our world today is much like the world of both Malachi and Luke, whose readings we heard this morning. Luke is a very careful and intentional writer. Did you notice the beginning of his gospel today? "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." That's quite a line up of movers and shakers. It is akin to beginning, "In the 6th year of the presidency of Obama, when Bruce Rauner was governor of Illinois, and Raum Emanuel was mayor of Chicago, Trudeau was Prime Minister of Canada, during the papacy of Francis, the word of God came to Jim Carton in the back woods of Arkansas"

There cannot be much confusion about when this is happening, right? Luke is very specific. By naming all of these players he is pinning his tale to a very exact time in history. As well, he is setting the stage. Who is he naming? Well all the powers and authorities of the time. Those who set and keep the status quo, those who command and oversee the laws and regulations of both the state and the church. And then he tells us the word of God came to Jim Carton, oh, I mean, John, son of Zechariah. But he might as well have said Jim Carton. In the back woods of Arkansas. Are you feeling the dissonance? Who the heck is Jim Carton? Who the heck was John, son of Zechariah? This nobody of a guy in the wilderness, far removed, both literally and figuratively, from the long list of who's who that opened the text. It is whiplash at its swiftest. And Luke does this so that the need for God, the need for John's word from God, takes place smack dab in the midst of real time, real history. Just like now.

And what does this John in the wilderness have to say that God said? Get ready! Prepare yourselves, NOW! For the word of the Lord is coming....the word that will make all paths straight, will level all the mountains, fill in all the valleys, smooth out all the rough places. In other words, the word that is coming will remove all obstacles, level all playing fields, make all things right... Oh, and one more thing; then all flesh, ALL, shall see the salvation of God.

And I don't know about you, but I'm sitting here 2000 years later, and I might be tempted to say 'oh really?...show me where the mountains and hills have been lowered. Show me where the crooked have been made straight. Show me the filled in valleys. And most of all, show me, SHOW ME, the salvation of God.' Yes, I might be quite tempted to say, 'I don't see it.' If ever there was a time we needed the incarnation, the gift of God in the manger, it seems like now, right? Or is it perhaps just that now is when we live? Is it perhaps that every time and every place needs the gift of the incarnation, needs to see the salvation of God?

So what does that look like, you ask. What does the salvation of God look like and how can we see it? Well, once again, we look to Jesus. We see salvation in him. And I mean tangible salvation. Salvation here and now, not some esoteric idea in the future of our death. Because while Christ's gift of salvation that is promised to us in death is not to be denied, Jesus showed us salvation in this life. He didn't come just so we could secure some ticket to the eternal life in heaven show. He didn't come just so we could say 'I've been saved.'

No! He came so that all flesh, ALL flesh, should see the salvation of God. In him. In his love. In his teachings. In his actions. And that is how we continue to see salvation. Or maybe a better word is to BE salvation. You see, the incarnation is about as scandalous as the cross. A god as a human? Unheard of. Undreamt of. Unimaginable. But that's the gift we have, a scandalous god who chooses to share our experience of humanity with us; every single dirty, difficult, messy, painful aspect of it.

And so this year, in light of all the terror and fear and suffering and pain that is weighing heavily on our hearts, I'm beginning to see Advent in a new light. You have heard me say every year in the spring, that we cannot have Easter without the grief of Good Friday. We cannot take in what the resurrection really means, if we have not suffered at the cross. And now I am seeing a similar pattern with Christmas. We cannot take in what Christmas, the Incarnation, really means, if we have not wailed about the condition of the world, if we have not felt the longing and the need for life to be different, for the hills to be leveled, for the valleys to be filled. We cannot be blinded by the light of the Christmas event, if we have not wept in the darkness of despair over the plight of the world.

The challenge is not to be done in by that despair. The challenge is to remember that last week we lit the candle of hope. Clinging to that hope, we ask to find peace. And I think we find some of that peace by looking for and finding the salvation of the Lord, that John in the wilderness proclaims. Where do we see that salvation? I think when we become that salvation, when we take on the actions of Jesus. Rather than 'see salvation' 'be salvation'.

So I'm going to offer up several suggestions of ways to 'be salvation' right now. Things that will hopefully help our hearts cling to the hope we are promised and to find the peace we seek. For an ADVENTURE of Peace, try one of these:

- spend an afternoon at our warming center
- sign up for an afternoon or evening at Feed My Starving Children, packing meals for hungry children around the globe
- collect old shoes from your house and drop them off at Share You Souls, who sends them around the world to those in need
- send an extra donation, or spend an evening with The Night Ministry, helping the homeless on the streets of Chicago
- write a letter or make a phone call to your elected officials regarding gun control
- send an extra Christmas card or two to our folks serving overseas

help someone who is ill decorate a small tree or their home  
take a plate of extra Christmas cookies to the fire station or the nursing station of a health care facility  
pay for the meal of someone standing behind you in a fast food place or pay the tolls for two cars behind you on the expressway  
refrain from posting one more meme that insults ANYONE or ANY party  
smile and say hello to every single person you pass, on the street, in the mall  
bite your tongue, or your typing, when you are tempted to enter the fray of conflict  
make one of your Advent goals listening, truly listening to others; I wonder what peace might come if we all stopped talking and instead merely listened.

I could go on and on, and I'm sure you are already thinking of ways to be salvation. The point is, none of these are hugely time consuming, none of them are costly beyond what you can afford. But each of them brings a moment of peace to some dark corner of life. And that is a good thing, a very good thing. We become overwhelmed by the problems of the world when we begin to think they all must be solved, once and for all, now. That is not our job; that is God's job.

Because the promise of that baby in the manger is two fold. The promise of peace is born that night in the manger, but the complete fulfillment of that peace eludes us right now. It will come one day, in fullness and glory; we spoke about that ADVENTure of Hope last week. But right now, we live between those two moments, between the incarnation or birth of God here and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in another realm. But that truth does not mean we sit around shaking our heads and wringing our hands at the state of humanity.

We can take a lesson here from our Jewish friends. A paraphrase of the teachings of one of their great sages and rabbis goes like this:

*Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.*

Help the world SEE the salvation of God by making your own ADVENTure of Peace this Advent. Don't look for the full kingdom, but look for little corners of darkness that you can shine light into. Pay attention to the world around you and the plight of others. Focus your Christmas preparations not just on your own home and family, but on preparing the world for peace. Before you leave today, map out your ADVENTure of Peace for the coming weeks. Where will you bring peace to some dark and painful area? Help someone, even just one person, see the salvation of God. Amen!