

Message for the Second Sunday in Advent & Communion

December 5, 2021

Luke 3:1-6

It was a beautiful spring morning many years ago and I was in the middle of preaching the sermon in Colborne. I heard the back door to the building open and shut but I didn't give it much thought. Then the door from the hallway to the sanctuary opened and an elderly man entered. He stood there for a moment just staring at everyone and everyone else just sat there and stared right back. He slowly made his way to the front pew where he sat down, took off his glasses, held them up to the light and began cleaning them. By then nobody was paying any attention to me. Instead, everyone was wondering what **he** was doing there for, being a small village, everyone knew who **he** was. He was a 'character', a man who didn't get along with either his family or anyone else for that matter. He liked to travel around the countryside hitching rides whenever he could. He also had a nasty trick of offering to shake hands with strangers but then would crush the unsuspecting person's fingers. Despite his age, he had a grip of iron. I may have been preaching about welcoming strangers that morning, but he most certainly was not welcome. He was the unwelcome guest who crashed the service, and I remembered him as I thought about today's scripture passage. I did so because in some ways John the Baptist is the unwelcome guest at our Christmas celebrations; in fact we might well wonder, "what on earth is he doing here?"

Every year on this second Sunday of Advent, this Sunday whose theme is peace, the church remembers John the Baptist. We might well wonder though, why? John is certainly a less than heart-warming figure. Consider how he dressed for example. Dressed in clothes made of camel hair, he looked like a wild man! Or consider his diet of locusts and wild honey! And then of course there was his message itself. To be sure he proclaimed the good news of the Messiah's coming, but he seemed to be far more preoccupied with judgement, condemnation, and repentance. As John himself said, "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire". Truly John's message was a mix of optimism and pessimism, good news and bad news. Indeed the ambiguity of John and his message is found in the hymn "On Jordan's Bank".

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.

So far so good as it is all upbeat. This is the good news of advent; Christmas is coming! We will soon be celebrating **the** birth in Bethlehem! But then comes the next verse:

Then cleansed be every breast from sin;
make straight the way for God within;
prepare we in our hearts a home
where such a mighty guest may come.

This is far more sombre and less cheery, isn't it? No talk now of joy and celebration, instead we are to prepare for Christmas by repenting; by asking for forgiveness from those whom we have hurt and by making restitution when possible. The word repentance in fact comes from the ancient Greek word that means "to turn around", and that is what repentance means. It means that we will turn our lives around by trying to do better and be better.

Now this may not be what we really want to hear during these weeks leading up to Christmas. We probably prefer to hear the message that we are to rejoice and be happy. Honestly, who really wants to hear about repentance at this time of year? Nevertheless, this is a message that we may need to hear, and we might well ask ourselves how we can celebrate Christmas, the birth of the Prince of Peace, if there is no peace within us or between us. Consider this true story.

Many years ago a fifteen-year-old boy named Robert Garth robbed, and without intending to, killed an elderly man. The police had no clue as to who had committed the crime and Garth had literally got away with murder. He knew that if he never told anyone what he had done, he would never be caught. Even so, he felt so miserable since he could never forget what he had done. He was haunted by guilt and finally, fifteen years later when he was thirty years old, he turned himself in to the authorities. He was tried and convicted and in light of his youth at the time of the crime and the fact that he had voluntarily turned himself in, he was given a very short prison sentence. Not surprisingly this

caused a bit of an uproar and some people got very upset arguing that the sentence didn't even begin to reflect the severity of the crime. Garth's response however was interesting. He said, "I was incarcerated in a cell for six months. I've been incarcerated in my mind for fifteen years. There is no comparison. The mind is far worse".

It may not be what we really want to hear at this time of year but if we wish to have peace and be at peace, then we must be prepared to repent of the wrongs of the past and at least try to make things right if we can. And one of the great promises of the sacrament that is being celebrated during the worship service this morning is that forgiveness, peace, and new beginnings are always ours for the asking.

Amongst other things, the Sacrament of Communion is a symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper and as such it speaks to us about Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins: "This is my body broken for you" or, as the old communion hymn puts it, "taste again the calm of sin forgiven". Communion means forgiveness and forgiveness means peace; peace with God, with others and even within our selves. One of the great promises of communion is that when we repent the slate is wiped clean and we are given a brand-new start, that what has been is not what must be. In fact it is through communion that the peace symbolized by this morning's Advent candle becomes a reality in our lives.

Truly in many ways John the Baptist with his call to repent may seem to be the unwelcome guest who crashes our Christmas celebrations. It may be tempting to just ignore John altogether and get on with the Christmas celebrations, but the scholars who drew up the lectionary knew that John's call to repent is a message that we need to hear and especially perhaps at this time of year. How can we truly celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace if there is no peace within us and between us?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of this new month, a month that marks the beginning of yet another season in the life of your creation, a month too in which we celebrate the birth of your Son, the Prince of Peace.

We thank you for the peace that your Son brings into our lives; the assurance that you love us, forgive us and are always with us. We pray that your peace may be a reality in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the world beyond both near and far.

We pray for all those who have no peace because of the pandemic; those whose health and well-being have been negatively impacted, those who have lost loved ones, and those who have lost their livelihoods.

We pray for families who are not at peace, even as Christmas draws nearer, because of differing and deeply held views about vaccinations.

We pray for all who feel so little peace because of the uncertainty of the future, as things seem to change so quickly in the world around us.

We pray for the sake of peace for those in British Columbia as they try to cope with the effects of all the flooding.

We pray for all the places in the world where there is no peace because of strife within nations or between nations. We especially pray for the situation in Eastern Europe between Ukraine and Russia as tensions continue to rise.

As we look forward to celebrating the birth of your Son, the Prince of Peace, grant that the peace that only you can give may be a reality for all of your children. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen