

Advent 2, Year A,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

8th December, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10 NRSV / Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV

So this morning we lit our second Advent candle,

the one that represents peace, or more precisely, shalom in Hebrew.

When you hear the word “peace,” what’s the first thing that comes to your mind?

For some it may mean calmness and tranquility.

For others, the cessation or lack of violence

may be what first comes into their minds when hearing that word.

These common definitions of peace all refer to the absence of something.

When we think of quiet tranquility, it is essentially the absence of noise,
of confusions, or distractions.

It’s a state of a mind,

clear of those things that pull us to and fro and cause us stress.

Likewise, in the context of violence and conflict,

peace means an absence of those aggressive actions;

a truce where each side ceases to take offensive action.

From a Judeo-Christian perspective, however,

peace has much more depth than just an absence of distraction or aggression.

Both words widely translated as “peace” in the Old and New Testaments,

eirene in Greek and particularly *shalom* in Hebrew,

have a strong relational meaning.

When you wish someone “peace” using this terminology,

you are not just wishing them calmness and tranquility.

Shalom implies wishes for completeness, success and fulfillment,

wholeness, harmony and well-being for both parties.

It’s much more than “let’s just stop fighting” or getting rid of what distracts us.

It’s action.

It’s caring about the well-being and wholeness of not only another,

but also of yourself. It’s individual and communal.

From a scriptural and faith perspective,

it’s reconnecting with the cosmic order ordained by God through creation,

and established with God’s people

through God’s covenant and promises to them.

In creation each part has meaning and functions

to promote the best, most just outcome

for the individual and the created community as a whole.

Yet as we are well aware, humans have a knack for trying to do things our own way,

of going against God’s created order

and causing the whole system to get out of whack;

leading to discord, injustice, and imbalance.

You may have heard the term for this before, sin.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson this morning

introducing our friend John the Baptist.

Matthew’s writer paints quite the colorful picture of John.

Camel hair tunic with a big leather belt,
wandering in the wilderness eating locusts and honey,
all the while calling people to “repent!”

And while many of us make take this descriptive imagery
to be a metaphor for being an outsider,
of not conforming to the religious structures of the day,
the symbolism goes much deeper than that.

Matthew’s gospel goes to great lengths to tie the good news that Jesus brings
to the hopes and promises of God’s people in the past.

Matthew’s gospel opens with the extensive genealogy
placing Jesus as the direct descendent of the Patriarchs
and the heir of King David.

Matthew’s gospel has to the story of the slaughter
of all the first born of Bethlehem,
which sounds an awful lot like the story of baby Moses.

Jesus’ parents flee with him in exile to the desert
and eventually to Egypt for refuge, paralleling not only Joseph’s journey,
but also a paralleling Moses being exiled to the desert,
as well as a metaphor for the exodus of Israel in the wilderness.

Which leads us to John in the wilderness himself,
sounding an awful lot like the story of the prophet Elijah
in the Old Testament.

Elijah spent most of his time as a prophet in the wilderness,

on the margins,

dressed as a bedoin which was typically a camel hair tunic

cinched with a leather belt.

So Matthew's gospel neatly connects all these dots

between the history of God's promises and actions in Israel's history

with the events of Jesus and his time.

John was Elijah returning to usher in the new messianic reign

that was just around the corner.

He, like Elijah, was calling the people of his day to "repent."

The word "repent" often has negative connotations for us.

We often associate repentance with guilt,

with the need to atone for our personal transgressions and shortcomings

in order to obtain absolution.

However, there is a difference between repentance and confession.

Repentance literally means to "turn around or change course."

Repentance for John requires action, a change in course.

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder

understands clearly what repentance looks like.

He states, "To repent is not to feel bad, but to think differently,

and therefore to act differently."

In the account of John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel,

John highlights quite clearly the change in action called for:

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none;

whoever has food must do likewise.”

In Matthew, we see the difference repentance should make

by understanding the kingdom of heaven better.

The dominion of heaven has been contrasted

with the reigns of worldly leaders from the beginning of Matthew.

Based on this contrast, Matthew shows us the ways of this new kind of rule,

God’s rule, and its transforming presence.

First, the clash between God’s reign and Herod’s

makes it clear that God’s rule challenges

the current political and religious authorities.

Being an insider of the status quo in Matthew is not a comfortable, safe position,

and insiders seem to know this.

Herod acts against the child Jesus in fear and paranoia,

rather than in humility, admiration, or worship.

Our text this morning points out the Pharisees and Sadducees

coming together to witness John’s work.

Normally these two groups had little to agree upon,

coming from differing social classes

and schools of religious thought.

But as insiders relying on the status quo for their legitimacy,

they made strange bedfellows in this challenge

to both their places in the status quo of that culture.

It is unlikely they were there for repentance and redemption;

more likely their intent was to challenge John
or gather intel for his eventual persecution.

Yet the writer of Matthew points out

that people were coming in droves from Jerusalem to hear John,
to seek repentance, and to be baptized and start anew.

What was it that attracted so many?

Peace, plain and simple.

They were seeking shalom,
that wholeness and harmony that was missing in their lives.

Most of them were not insiders.

They participated in the status quo that kept their world rolling along
yet they saw firsthand its shortcomings.

They knew life on the outside, they saw the misery of those on the margins,
or were on the margins themselves.

They could feel the imbalance, that something wasn't right
about the way their part of the world worked.

There needed to be a change of course, action needed to be taken.

They were ready to step away from the status quo into a new reality,
leaving the world of earthly rulers for the kingdom of God;
a restoration of Creation as it was meant to be.

John offered them a different path to take;

a new path for them which was actually the original path God always intended,
one of justice and equity,

not the self-serving paths of the world.

Yet John merely started them down the path;

one would come after him to take them the rest of the way,

one who baptized with fire and spirit.

This morning, I wonder how many of us are just going along with the status quo,

plodding along in our place on the inside.

While we may not be in positions of political or religious power,

we like to fit in with the world,

with the worldly rulers and states of our time.

We like to think it makes life simpler, easier.

But does it?

How much does our inaction and going with the flow and inaction

support the "brood of vipers" of our day?

And more importantly, do we find peace, shalom, in a life living the status quo?

Or is something missing?

This week, let's give time for reflection and meditation

to the repentance each of us needs to seek.

What changes and actions do we need to take

to be more in line with the kingdom of God that draws near,

and less in step with the status quo of this realm.

Like last week, you all have sheets in your bulletin

with two statements to reflect and respond to.

In the coming week, how will you share peace for yourself,

and what can you do to seek peace, or the well-being and fulfillment of others?

What can we as the body of Christ

do to encourage peace and repentance and change

among the greater community?

As we enter into our call to service and listen to our special music,

give some thought as to at least one specific way

you can seek a different course in your own life this week,

and one way we can seek to improve the course of those

in the community around us.

You can place those in the offering plates on your way out

as a way of commitment to your meditations.

I hope and pray we all seek a change in course, repentance,

to bring us closer to the kingdom that draws near

and enters this world at Christmas. Amen.