

Second Sunday in Advent
One Word
9 December 2012
Pastor Samuel B. Adams
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

Today we lighted our second Advent candle. By long tradition, it is often called the Peace candle. It's unique promise is powerful in any moment in our world's unfolding history. It brings a tiny glimmer of living light into a world where darkness seems, all too often, the overwhelming victor. It adds its light to the tiny ray of hope from last week's Candle of Hope. We have now doubled the candlepower on our Advent wreath as we move one step closer to the coming of the One the world will call the Prince of Peace.

But is genuine peace an achievable reality? In our world the hope for peace often seems like a wispy fantasy. Think about some of the most insistent stories in the news this week: The government of Syria preparing to use devastating chemical weapons in its bloody confrontation with its citizens. And that struggle spilling into neighboring Lebanon. Egyptian people locked in bloody confrontation – again – over their nation's draft constitution. Political posturing between Israel and Palestine over new settlements escalating the simmering tension that is their daily reality. Peace in the Middle East, which cradled the Prince of Peace, seems as distant as ever.

At home, our president elect is locked in a struggle with leaders of Congress to avert what has been named "the fiscal cliff." Outwardly, polarized voices out of our two party system are using carefully scripted charges and counter charges to demonize each other, while most people want our leaders to find a workable – and fair – compromise. It is worth praying that something more hopeful is taking shape in quiet conversations out of the glare of news cameras. Nearer home, people are still recovering from hurricane Sandy as winter temperatures are upon us. This could be a long, cold winter, and a threatening one for too many.

Meanwhile the carols are blaring in the malls. Have you been there and heard them? Again this year, "***Peace on earth, good will toward men***" seems to be about how much we will spend on each other this year. The penitential season of Advent and the world shattering news of Christmas have largely been replaced by commercial glitz. Our huge festival of winter has degenerated into a cynical diversion for a culture that really doesn't feel much hope for genuine peace

anymore. As a culture, we seem to be trying hard to believe that twinkling lights and holiday rituals will transform the dark of winter and bring us through.

Into this madness comes the strangely outspoken figure in today's gospel lesson. We call him John the Baptist, John the Baptizer. We visualize him as a wild man, and the sketchy historical references in the gospels support that impression. His personal grooming and his dietary habits would not help him fit in to the comfortable society of his time – or ours. Locusts and honey were staples of his diet.

But his preaching was electrifying. His words spread through nearby towns and villages with a speed that was the first century equivalent of Twitter. Listen to a few verses from Luke's account.

“He [that is John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Most of us are all too familiar with Isaiah's startling imagery. We have read these words, or have heard them in the stirring strains of Handel's great oratorio, *The Messiah*, perhaps as recently as this week. The music may stir us deeply, but do the words really touch us anymore? It's easier to quietly shelve them as the ravings of a dreamer, or prophecies of another time that we will not see in this life.

But they are meant to haunt us. Their very unreality is designed to hold a mirror to our complacent acceptance of a world where God's kind of *shalom* will seldom be lived – and then mostly on the margins of life. They are there to plant a new seed within our consciousness, to call out a new shoot from the dead stump that we tend to mistake for reality.

It took that distressing fanatic, John the Baptizer, to push Isaiah's theme home several centuries after Isaiah's time. John knew that his world was broken beyond repair. John knew that the religious leaders were simply recycling the unrighteousness and injustice of their time in the name of faith and obedience to God. No wonder Matthew's John thundered that they were a brood of vipers, and

den of vicious snakes. I confess that I would never invite John as a guest preacher in a church I served. He's too negative. Maybe, too honest?

But it was the miracle of John the Baptizer's ministry that people responded in droves to his preaching. His hard message must have seemed more real, and more hopeful, more faithful to the teachings on which they were raised. They were ready to hear that the world and its leaders were tainted, to a one. Hope was not in *them*. Hope was in God, who created the world and who would recreate God's beloved people in the baptismal waters of the Jordan.

John's hearers were told that they must *repent, turn around, change direction*. They had to return to God's vision of *shalom*. This word from ancient Hebrew means infinitely more than simply the absence of war and violence. It also means wholeness, well being, justice, reconciliation. And if it means wholeness, then it also means healing.

That is still the message of John. And the message of Advent. Hope for world peace is in God, not in Damascus, or Cairo, or Jerusalem. Not even Washington. Hope is in God alone who calls us, recreates us, saves us from the patchwork of hells that human cultures have created, and are recreating even now. We must turn around. We must change direction. We must repent. Otherwise the real Christmas will pass us by. We won't believe that a little child can lead the nations to *God's shalom*. We'll be left with all the glamorous wrappings, but without the gift at the center of the season. What a tragedy.

Sermons on repentance are not popular. We preachers avoid these texts like the AIDS virus. Or we retrieve and polish them when we want to instill some good guilt in our hearers. Because we have little more idea what to do with John's exhortation to repent than did our spiritual forebears, the Pharisees and Sadducees. A little guilt, and then the promise of God's unconditional love to bring some relief. That seems like enough.

But it is not enough. On some level we all know it, though we would rather not acknowledge it. The only way to God's *shalom* is God's re-creation of us. It is the work of the Spirit blowing over us and around us, bringing us the breath of God. In other times we have called it salvation.

When we are recreated, born anew, born of the Spirit, we see with different eyes and hear with different ears. Bleak gives way to blessed. Isaiah's images

make sense because they sing of a world where all are cared for, where violence is unknown. In the words of the prophet Joel,

“the Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh. Our young see visions, and our older people dream dreams.”

We will see beyond the present. And beyond the past. We will see what is possible in God’s *shalom*, even as we walk daily in a world blind to the vision of peace we have from God. It is no accident that all those verbs are future tense. Just like the beloved prayer Jesus taught his disciples, “*thy kingdom come*.”

The exciting news is that we are part of bringing that vision alive. Transformed by God, we will work for justice for all people, especially the poor, the homeless, the victims, the oppressed. We will lose our patience with the materialism which blinds us and imprisons us in old, dead realities. As citizens of *God’s realm of shalom* we will seek to live in new ways. We will care for the sick and the needy, advocate for the oppressed, and pray for strength to keep alive this startling shoot from the stump of Jesse. Living as God’s spirited people.

No. It will not be easy. We will falter and stumble. We will become discouraged and lose heart. We will retreat again into the winter of the Spirit. But our God is faithful. God is faithful when we are faithful, and God is faithful when we are not. That is what we mean by God’s unconditional love. When we are too wounded to be faithful, God will find for us a nurturing people who have glimpsed the vision we carry. We will pray for each other and nurture each other. When the child comes to lead us, we will be ready to follow, one day at a time.

When we light the candle of Peace we are relying on a word that does not nearly translate the Bible’s word. *Shalom. Shalom.* That was John’s word. And Jesus’ word. And when John and Jesus said *Shalom!* they meant it. All of it! Remember – wholeness, well being, justice, reconciliation. Healing. John, dirty John, distressing John, blunt John, had it right. Today is a day to repent, to turn from the struggles and polarities of our past, and to turn toward the God who is waiting to heal us and lead us where we have never been. Advent is the promise that God is even now sending the Son who will save us, heal us, and lead us. And we do know what to do. Deep down. We have heard it over and over again. Answer the prophet’s call to repentance. Then our path is simple. One more word names it. Follow. Thanks be to God! Amen.