

St James United Church

Message for December 5, 2021

The Second Sunday of Advent



“The Promise of Peace”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6; “Touched by an Angel” by Maya Angelou

This week our CE newsletter came out. I appreciated Susan's article on candle-lighting in Godly Play. It reminded me how in the United Church we're encouraged to be creative in designations for the Sundays of Advent beyond what's become customary. I appreciate that because despite my statement last week that I understood why we reflect on peace, joy and love for the last three Sundays, I find that the theme of peace only fits nicely in Year A with the reading about the wolf lying down with the lamb. This year as Malachi prophesies that one is coming like refiner's fire or fuller's soap? Not so much. They're images of purification, the first for silver, the second for cloth, the process needing extreme heat or caustic lye respectively. Yikes. But this is my first Advent with you and I wanted to go with what you most often do. As a consequence, I've struggled to find the peace.

Which I guess is the point. The reality is that peace is quite elusive. No sooner do we have it than it disappears again. Someone wisely said to me recently that we tend to go to war thinking it will solve our problems when going to war is actually their source. I couldn't agree more. Rather than resolving the issues, we actually add new ones, increasing the likelihood of hostilities. Part of the issue, I think, is that we approach war, and afterward, keeping peace, outwardly, projecting our own issues onto the other nation, group, or person. We see a bit of this in Malachi - Levites need to be purified to save the nation. But Luke offers another view. He opens this part of his gospel with a description of John the Baptist. Joining it to prophecy, he implies that John is the one who was like refiner's fire or fuller's soap. But rather than expect others to be purified, he calls for individual repentance, inviting everyone to be baptized as a sign of their recommitment to God.

This is an important shift, the quest for peace beginning within as we face the roots of conflict and division. We often hear repentance negatively, but in the Common English Bible we get the true meaning of the Greek word *metanoia* - changing your mind and heart. We get mired in our habits, not realizing how our attitudes as much as our behaviours hurt others, and us too. In the 12 Step movement, this is called “stinking thinking”, a recognition that the stories we tell our-selves shape our choices. Here's a personal example. My mom died when I was nine. Feeling rejected, I believed her death was because I didn't deserve her love. That became my story and left me looking for approval from others while also waiting to be rejected, often doing things to bring it about. Like I said “stinking thinking”. And we all have inner narratives like that.

We also have collective narratives. As we heard in the prayer before the readings, John came to prepare the way for Jesus, who in turn prepared a way for God to bring us peace. Traditionally, we've been taught that Jesus did that because we were in sin, and so died to save us. Many of us understandably react to that, knowing that such internal negativity reinforces our penchant for bad choices. It also places undue emphasis on the sin of our first parents in Genesis chapter three and ignores the first two chapters that affirm how everything is good, each of us bearing God's image and likeness. If we believe the Bible is inspired, we can't ignore one insight at the cost to another. We needed to be set right, but not, I believe, because we're fundamentally bad.

Richard Rohr puts it this way - Jesus wasn't born to change God's mind about us but to change our minds about God. That includes changing how we see ourselves. As I shared last week, Jesus' preferred title for himself is "son of man" or more inclusively "child of humanity". We honour him as "son of God" but he is not one at a cost to the other. He comes to show us who we are, that we are each deeply loved by God, that love is in fact our fundamental identity because we are made in God's image and likeness. Love, as Maya Angelou tells us, may "cost all we are/ and will ever be. Yet it is only love/which sets us free." It costs everything in that it cuts through our fundamental sin, not that we are bad but that we believe we are, and so both separate from God and each other. But that narrative has had an impact on how we see others. Often needing to protect our inner selves, we project our "sin" onto others. This creates space not just for conflict, but attitudes of supremacy and unfounded moral judgment. We're made in God's image but we also create God in our own, and this impacts how we treat others. In fear and anger, we create an angry God. In our shame, we project a judging God, in turn judging others. If we feel powerless, God can be either indifferent or in total control. Thankfully Jesus, love come from "its high holy temple", shows us that these gods aren't real. This "son of God" and "child of humanity" reveals God's true identity and our own. God is his heart, and so love is his heart as well. And so, it is ours.

This is where peace begins. God at our centre, not despite but because of us, warts and all. Peace begins in self-awareness and acceptance. I'm defined by who I am, not what I do. Seeing myself, as God does, with love and understanding, cuts through my internal narrative. Despite feeling rejected, I know I'm loved, even when I've done things to push others away. Now healing isn't instant. Erasing self-talk takes constant repetition, but it takes hold over time. As it does, it shifts how I treat others, my actions rooted in how I see myself. Beyond this, the roots of division, the drive for conflict fall away. As I see myself with greater compassion, I try to see others likewise. But more than this, I start to see God's love shining not just in me but everyone, and everything. And here lies true and lasting peace. How can we be in conflict when we share the same heart?

When we see this, we're set free, a path cleared for the peace that is God. It isn't automatic. My wrestling with the readings is emblematic of the inner work to quiet stories of sin and separation and listen to the one imprinted on creation and written in our hearts. We're good, blessed, loved. Each and every one. As we listen to that lesson, peace will grow between us. Amen.