



ADVENT WEEK 2 | PEACE

December 6, 2020

CALL TO WORSHIP | ISAIAH 40:1-11

"Comfort, oh comfort my people," says your God.
"Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make clear
That she has served her sentence,
that her sin is taken care of—forgiven!
She's been punished enough and more than enough,
and now it's over and done with."

Thunder in the desert!
"Prepare for GOD's arrival!
Make the road straight and smooth; a highway fit for our God.
Fill in the valleys, level off the hills,
Smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks.
Then GOD's bright glory will shine, and everyone will see it
Yes. Just as GOD has said."

A voice says, "Shout!"
I said, "What shall I shout?"

"These people are nothing but grass, their love fragile as wildflowers.
The grass withers, the wildflowers fade, if GOD so much as puffs on them.
Aren't these people just so much grass?
True, the grass withers and the wildflowers fade,
but our God's Word stands firm and forever."

Climb a high mountain, Zion.
You're the preacher of good news.
Raise your voice. Make it good and loud, Jerusalem.
You're the preacher of good news.
Speak loud and clear. Don't be timid!

WREATH LIGHTING | PEACE

Advent is a season of anticipation. To feel together the expectancy of our need for God's presence and salvation, and together to celebrate God's once response as we hurry his future return. The days of Advent mean to "rouse us from spiritual sleepiness into a new waking,"¹ with the same energy as an expectant mother for the coming birth of her child. "For," says Anne Ridler, "birth is awaking, birth is effort and pain; /And now at midwinter [i.e., Advent and Christmas] are the hints, inklings [the practices and decorations and songs which tell us]/ That sleep must be broken."

I've asked Dan to read the entirety of Ridler's poem to aid in our wakefulness this second Sunday of Advent. Listen, and read along, the words of *Christmas and Common Birth* by Anne Ridler.

Christmas and Common Birth | Anne Ridler

Christmas declares the glory of the flesh:
And therefore a European might wish
To celebrate it not at midwinter but in spring,
When physical life is strong,
When the consent to live is forced even on the young,
Juice is in the soil, the leaf, the vein,
Sugar flows to movement in limbs and brain.
Also before a birth, nourishing the child
We turn again to the earth
With unusual longing—to what is rich, wild,
Substantial: scents that have been stored and strengthened
In apple lofts, the underwash of woods, and in barns;
Drawn through the lengthened root; pungent in cones
(While the fir wood stands waiting; the beechwood aspiring,
Each in a different silence), and breaking out in spring
With scent sight sound indivisible in song.

Yet if you think again
It is good that Christmas comes at the dark dream of the year
That might wish to sleep ever.
For birth is awaking, birth is effort and pain;
And now at midwinter are the hints, the inklings
(Sodden primrose, honeysuckle greening)
That sleep must be broken.
To bear new life or learn to live is an exacting joy:
The whole self must waken; you cannot predict the way
It will happen, or master the response beforehand.
For any birth makes an inconvenient demand;
Like all holy things
It is frequently a nuisance, and its needs never end;
Freedom it brings: We should welcome release
From its long merciless rehearsal of peace.

So Christ comes

¹ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting on the Word*, 62.

At the iron senseless time, comes
To force the glory into frozen veins:
 His warmth wakes
Green life glazed in the pool, wakes
All calm and crystal trance with the living pains.

 And each year
In seasonal growth is good—year
That lacking love is a stale story at best
 By God's birth
Our common birth is holy; birth
Is all at Christmas time and wholly blest.

While we celebrate Jesus' arrival in the dusty town of Bethlehem each and every December 25th, the truth is, the first noel was a shock to the system, despite being highly anticipated. The persistent pleas over generations of "How Long O, Lord?" finally met their reply in that angelic herald, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, *peace*, goodwill among men." (Lk. 2:14). A surprising declaration made not to rulers and nobility but lowly shepherds, not at the pivot of a great battle, but an infant's first cries. A new world set in motion in the most unexpected of ways. Shalom, *peace*, that long expectant wholeness, now dwelling on earth, among humanity. Glory in the flesh indeed!

Yet it is safe to say, looking back over the last two thousand plus years, that the world—even God's own people—were not prepared for the arrival of the prince of peace that first Christmas night. Nor often are we, I think.

Oh sure, there were plenty then, as there is a plentitude today, that anticipate God's deluge, his Spirit covering the earth like the waters of the sea. This minority multitude, expectant of God's arrival, tend as they did then to, with rigor and ritual, rehearse peace through law and creed, as something new and alive is growing within, stretching joints and tissue. Aching pains and unsettled stomachs all indicators that something wholly new is forming. And then, one-day new life wakens quite unexpectantly, though highly anticipated.

Such is the nature of Christmas. More than holiday wishes, family feasts, and even generosity on unparalleled display, and more than righteous rituals and exacting lectionaries, Christmas is the startling entrance of something holy/wholly new. It is a season of surprise, of hidden treasures, of unexpected abundance. Christmas is the birth of peace, a delivery whose hour we cannot predict, nor can we master our response before its arrival. A new life that though a bundle of blessing, turns out frequently a nuisance with needs that never end—a birth, like all holy things, which makes an inconvenient demand to consume our energy and attention utterly as a way of life.

At midwinter, we remember that life has sprung upon us, that there is new life, no longer rehearsals of peace, of waiting for birth, but life itself, in us, through us, because of Jesus. That first noel, at the birth of our King, the angels did sing, is peace on earth among humans like we. And so our common birth, our lives as daughters of teachers and sons of shop keepers, our birth-again as children of God, is holy, and especially at Christmas time, wholly (entirely, fully) blest for we sing with the angels

[While lighting the second Advent candle, say:] "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, amongst us and until all know what we know and live, *peace*, goodwill among men."

PRE-SERMON READING | MARK 1:1-8

The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you;
He'll make the road smooth for you.
Thunder in the desert!
Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of the life-change that leads to the forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit [cloak], tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached, he said, 'The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.'

SERMONETTE | Something New

As we mentioned last week, old cousin John isn't like the rest of the family. His choice of attire is somewhat questionable, as are his eating habits. You could say that he doesn't seem to mind that his dark green dickie is visible under his white sweater. Nor is he ashamed to ask you to save the turkey neck as his favored cut of "meat." No, cousin John is just different. And while what he says is often off-putting, we have to acknowledge that there is no gospel, no good news change in the plot without him.

All joking aside, John the Baptizer is pivotal to how and why we celebrate Christmas today. "John is the one who gets everything ready; you cannot jump into the goodness of Christmas without readiness from him."²

Our text this morning depicts the unconventional cousin John out in the desert wild, fervently, and with growing attention, getting everything and everyone ready. He is, making smooth the path of the long-awaited Messiah. His means of clearing out the rocks and filling in the ruts for his cousin is by proclaiming, in a word, "Repent!" Turn, John says from your sin by changing your life for God's about to do something, and you don't want to miss out! Ironically, the camel-haired-covered, grasshopper-with-a-pinch-of-honey-eating, vagabond is getting everyone to wash up and clean off!

In some ways, the unusual manners of John made his message palpable to the people longing for God to change things. His eccentricities put him in company with prophets of old. The stories of the wily Old Testament prophets were well known by those making their way out of the city to see for themselves if cousin John fit the bill. His message, necessary and true, was not new. He wasn't saying anything different than Isaiah and Micah and others before him. He was announcing what God said would come to be. And, like the prophets before, he was calling the people to repent. To turn

² Brueggemann, 40.

and remove all those things keeping them from recognizing and participating in the salvation just around the corner. Turn, the prophets past and John say—as do many rituals of Advent and even the spirit of Christmas repeat. Like John, the traditions, decorations, songs, and celebrations speak, “repent,” perhaps not as bluntly, of course.

Nevertheless, what we see and hear in the prophets and stories of the Christmas season is: Turn from those habitual and destructive ways of living with one another, yourself, and your God. Turn from greed and frantic consumerism. Turn from anxiousness, constant fear, and defensiveness. Turn from self-righteous, fraudulent pretense. Turn from alienating and hating those not like you. Implied is a confession of the sickness of sin in your society and your heart. Do the work of confession, and take the first step towards preparedness by getting clean, says John, by believing in the season's spirit say our holiday specials.

But, as we read last week and as John admits in this morning's passage, what made John special was that he was making ready for something, someone, wholly new. Something, someone who would enter the story after him. As John said, “The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.”

The spirit that led the people to confess, repent, and enter the waters of John's baptism was the same spirit that Christmas engenders within us and even our secular culture. It is a spirit that recognizes that life together could and should be different. That generosity should outshine greed. That humility should outshine vanity. That love should outshine hate; forgiveness outshine bitterness, peace outshine fear. It's the Christmas spirit that fuels the magic and the sacrifices that make the world new, better, whole—whether the world is your relationships, your community, or your future! Or says every holiday movie of the last seventy-five or so years.

Such a spirit is a good thing! But it is not the thing. It is only preparatory. John, like the Christmas season, gets us looking for God to work, gets us living in-step with the kind of work God does, but there has to be something more than the spirit that encourages us to believe in what is good, true, and beautiful. For if there is nothing more than what is stirring within us at the moment, then the moment the baptismal waters dry off, we fall back into, at best, those merciless rehearsals of peace, groaning through routine and ritual in the pains of preparation rather than new life.

From the confession of our longing for a savior to the encouragement of generosity, charity, and togetherness, the season of Christmas engenders in us the desire to live life with God and one another in the right way. But, like the baptism of John, as soon as the calendar turns, the cleansing waters dry up. No sooner have our affections been stirred, our sincere desire to be better, do better, peaked than we find ourselves struggling to keep our resolutions. Isn't it true?

But that is the wonder of John's place in the story. He, like the Christmas and Advent season, are not the main action of the drama. He, and this season, help us anticipate what comes next, anticipated but nonetheless surprising, God with us!

John wasn't the good news himself, but the bearer of it. His job was to prepare us, as much as we could be prepared, by letting us know something better was coming, something utterly new. His message was turn and change from the outside so that you'd be ready for whatever comes next. Jesus' message was different. His message was, turn, and be changed, from the inside out, for what is next is here. Something new has been born! The good news of Jesus, the baptismal waters by which those who follow him are entirely submerged, is not preparatory but exhaustive. They do not prepare us for change but change us from the inside out. A few chapters later, in Mark 7, Jesus explains this John surpassing good news, he says,

‘Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him...Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and goes out in the latrine?’

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from *within, out of the heart* of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from *within*, and they defile a person.'

John described Jesus' message and ministry as being "Changed from the inside out." A change of heart, not washed hands or courageous and holy intentions, is the gift of one immersed in the way of Jesus in relationship with God, covered and filled with the Holy Spirit. The preparations of John, like the practices of Advent and even the spirit of the Christmas season, make smooth the way for life as God intended. It reminds us of what the Father desires and the life the Father wants for us. What he wants for us is not to rehearse peace but to be peacemakers—ones who know a whole life because his life is now ours. Our lives are his!

From John's responses to Jesus from prison, I am not sure he fully expected what he was clearing the way for what he thought God would do. But that is the nature of newness, that even when it is anticipated, it is somewhat surprising. I wonder if this Christmas, when we are most desperate to follow cousin John to get ready for God to act if we will be surprised that God has already brought (and is ever bringing) the peace we seek. Will Christmas be, as it was at first, a surprising immersion in the Holy Spirit that has changed us, or a spirit to change that fades?

We come to Christmas day every year anticipating God to act, desiring to be ready for him to come again, but unsurprised that he has already at work in us, through us, and in our world. Will we, as John later described some most moved by the spirit of his message, of Christmas, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8)? Will we live what is already true, at peace because peace has come?

Pray with me.

COMMUNION | CANTICLE 9

We added last Sunday a new element to our Advent tradition, the reading of a canticle. These scriptures, often sung as a [chant](#) and fill the sanctuaries, halls, and homes of many of our sisters and brothers around the world this very morning. Today, we'll chant a song sung by Simeon in Luke 2. A hymn of confession and praise and supplication.

I'll read the bulk of the hymn; then we'll say together the highlighted portion.

Canticle 9, The Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29:32)

Lord, you now have set your servants free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of ours have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING | Psalm 85 (Bethany via Zoom)

GOD, you smiled on your good earth! You brought good times back to Jacob!
You lifted the cloud of guilt from your people; you put their sins far out of sight.
You took back your sin-provoked threats; you cooled your hot, righteous anger.

Help us again, God of our help; don't hold a grudge against us forever.
You aren't going to keep this up, are you?
 scowling and angry, year after year?
Why not help us make a fresh start—a resurrection life?
 Then your people will laugh and sing!
Show us how much you love us, GOD! Give us the salvation we need!

We can't wait to hear what he'll say.
GOD's about to pronounce his people well, the holy people he loves so much,
 so they'll never again live like fools.
See how close his salvation is to those who fear him?
Our country is home base for Glory!

Love and Truth meet in the street,
 Right Living and Whole Living embrace and kiss!
Truth sprouts green from the ground,
 Right Living pours down from the skies!
Oh yes! GOD gives Goodness and Beauty;
 our land responds with Bounty and Blessing.
Right Living strides out before him and clears a path for his passage.

BENEDICTION | 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of us, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.

But when the Day of God's judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but *we'll* hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness [Right Living].

So, my dear friends, since this is what we have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation.