

“Peace”

Luke 1:57-80
December 9, 2007

Read Luke 1:57-80

God’s plan and purposes may not always be evident to us – but our not realizing what is happening does not mean God is not at work.

God’s plan for Christmas did not start with Jesus in the manger. God’s plan was already happening hundreds of years before with the prophets revealing God’s promise of a messiah: a savior. It builds up in excitement and anticipation with John the Baptist. It culminates and reaches its pinnacle in the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.

It also is important to remember that Christmas is not the end of the story, either. It is a high point, to be sure, but God is not done yet. Even as we remember the wonder of that first Christmas, we also have to keep our eyes forward towards where that first Christmas is pointing. The church gathers to move forward, to follow as Jesus “guides our feet into the way of peace.”

Zechariah’s Story

The birth of John the Baptist comes before the birth of Jesus.

John’s job was to prepare the way for the Lord, to proclaim what God was doing even before it happened. And so it is even with John’s birth.

There are two parts of John’s birth narrative. Our Scripture lesson this morning is the second part.

In the first part (1:5-25), we meet John’s father, Zechariah, who was part of the priestly class. There were twenty-four priestly “courses” – teams or divisions – that would provide service in the temple. Each “course” would be responsible for two weeks each year. Their duties were determined by lot. In other words, the job each priest would perform was determined by the equivalent of picking a slip out of a hat.

One of the special jobs was to make the incense offering. The priest would take a smoking pot into the center of the Temple, the Holy of holies, beyond the curtain and out of sight of everyone else. The honor of doing this would fall to a priest only a few times during their lifetime, so it was a big deal.

Details in Luke’s account indicate to us that Zechariah would have been leading as a part of the 3:00 p.m. prayer time. Many people had gathered for the evening prayers. Take note of this: it was in the context of the faithful in Israel engaged in worship and prayer that God sends the announcement of the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah.

So, there's Zechariah, an older man, going to the center of the Temple to make the incense offering while the people are praying. It was the same thing that hundreds – if not thousands – of other priests had done before him. There was nothing on the outside to indicate that something different was going to happen on this day. Yet we, like them, never know when God is going to show up.

Zechariah gets into the sanctuary and sees someone beside the stand where the incense was supposed to go.

We do not know if Zechariah had ever been in this sanctuary before, but we know that he knew this was different. Well, more than that: Zechariah was terrified. In the ensuing conversation, the angel tells Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, are going to be parents. Zechariah is puzzled because both he and Elizabeth are old. Age not being an obstacle for God, the angel (who identifies himself as “Gabriel,” the same angel who interpreted Daniel's dreams of the end times and who would make the annunciation to Jesus' mother, Mary) the angel affirms that God will do what he has said. Because Zechariah did not believe Gabriel's words, he is struck dumb.

That brings us to the second part of the birth narrative. Elizabeth, indeed, did become pregnant. The time came to deliver John. Eight days after his birth, as was the custom, the parents presented the boy for circumcision – marking him as a part of the covenant community. Neighbors urged them to name the boy Zechariah, to honor his father who had been stricken. Good intentions; just not God's intentions. Elizabeth informs all those around that the boy is to be named “John.” “No,” they protest and they went to Zechariah. He understood their protest but wrote a note affirming what Elizabeth had already declared, that the boy was to be named, “John,” meaning “Yahweh has been gracious.”

At that point, Zechariah's tongue is released and he begins to prophesy; that is, to proclaim the great deeds of God.

Don't miss what is happening here: Zechariah is symbolic of Israel's experience. For an extended period of time, Israel had experienced a silence and frustration. Then, suddenly, God moves through Zechariah to announce a remarkable blessing, “God has been gracious.” Zechariah's proclamation at John's birth is completely consistent with John's function as herald for Jesus, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” Zechariah sings about God's action *before* Jesus was born, before the angelic announcement to shepherds, before the Magi have come from afar. Through Zechariah, God is declaring what he has done before he has done it. John, “God has been gracious,” points the way to “Emmanuel” (God is with us.)

Look then at the substance of Zechariah's song beginning in v. 68. There are three parts: the first, recalling God's goodness and praising God for his faithfulness; second, the role John the Baptist will play in ushering the eschatological time of the coming messiah; and, third, the meaning of the incarnation. For our purposes this morning, we are going to look only at the meaning of the incarnation as it is revealed in Zechariah's song.

Guiding our feet into the way of peace.

Verse 77 is as succinct a description of Jesus' purpose as you will find. John will give knowledge of "salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." That is a good summation.

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

What is peace?

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is communion. It is active, it is engaged, it is relational. Why the emphasis on peace? Peace is something we all seek. People try all sorts of ways to achieve peace: through the security offered by having a lot of money, through the energy expended to make everyone around think well of you, through the expression of power and control, through emptiness. None of those ways succeed: you can never have enough money, your reputation and popularity are only as strong as your most recent effort, and you cannot control everything to protect yourself, you cannot empty yourself without being filled with something else.

The truth is: without Jesus, we do not have any peace. Without receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior, with seeking to follow him as a disciple, we do not have peace – we are, in fact, at war with God.

"There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked." (Isaiah 48:22). Peace is something achieved by the LORD. In Isaiah 2, the Messiah, "shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; national shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Peace means living within the holy presence of the sovereign God.

Jesus is the way of peace. Following Jesus guides us in the way of peace. Standing still, we do not have peace. Going our own way, we do not have peace. It is only following the "tender mercy of our God," that is, Jesus, that we have peace.

Peace is living in an ongoing and growing relationship with Jesus – the same Jesus who will guard our hearts and minds.

"Peace" is a word Jesus used a lot. He is consistent in using it; peace is tied to faith. Those with faith in him know peace, experience peace, receive peace. Those who do not have faith in him experience his peace as division and the sword. Just looking within Luke:

- Jesus tells the woman who welcomed him and anointed his feet with tears and drying with her hair, "Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:50)
- Jesus told the woman who could not stop her hemorrhage, who came up and touched his garment, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (Luke 8:48).

- He told the disciples whom he sent out to proclaim the good news, “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.” (Luke 10:5-6)
- When he talked about the end times and the division that his truth would cause, he said, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Luke 12:51) Those who receive him have peace; those who do not receive him have no peace.
- Talking about the cost of discipleship, he asked, “What king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.” Luke 14:32 God is sovereign and the most powerful; so what are the terms of peace? Faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.
- On Palm Sunday, as he rode into Jerusalem in triumph, with the people shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” (Luke 19:38) Later, he would rebuke the religious in Jerusalem for not joining in the praise, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19:42)
- On Easter Sunday, after hearing the testimony of witnesses to his resurrection, Jesus appeared in the Upper Room among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Faith brings peace. Salvation brings peace. Communion brings peace. Jesus himself brings peace. He himself is peace.

But peace is active, it does not stand still. We often mistake standing still as peace, but we find that it leads only to loneliness. Stillness is death, it is not peace. Following Jesus involves movement, “he guides our feet into the way of peace.” Jesus says, “Come, follow me.” There is a way and there is movement.

The problem is that we often treat following Jesus like the Rose Parade. When I was attending Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, we went to the Rose Parade one year. We got up early on New Years Day, we staked out a spot along the route and we waited. A little after 8:00 a.m., there was a bang, then the Stealth Bomber flew overhead, then there was a long pause (we were about two miles down on the route). Finally, there was a band that marked the real beginning of the show. We watched the floats and the horses and the other bands. We watched for the few hours it took to have the whole thing pass us by. Then, we went home.

For us, the parade was a show. We watched, we consumed. We judged. We compared notes about what we liked and what we did not like. We went home.

But we never got in the Parade. We were not on the journey with those who were following the leader.

Zechariah prophesies about the parade – the parade where John will be in front proclaiming the coming of the Lord. How is your faith? Are you in the parade following Jesus or are you watching the show?

Yes, the analogy breaks down a little bit: we were not invited to join the Rose Parade (in fact we would have been arrested if we had tried to join it).

Faith and the Rose Parade are very different. We are specifically invited to join the parade towards peace and Jesus is guiding our journey in the way of peace. It leads us to communion with God – salvation by the forgiveness of our sins – where we know the joy of a restored face-to-face relationship with the one who created us, redeemed us, sustains us, and loves us.

Conclusion

Advent is a time of hope. Hope is the confidence that comes from spending time in the good news of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ – the promise of his coming, the incarnation, his life, his death, and his resurrection – and hope is the confidence that God will continue to be faithful to his promises in Christ’s return and the ultimate manifestation of the glorious Kingdom of Heaven.

Advent is a time of peace. Zechariah heralded John’s birth and the significance of the role that John would play. John’s role was to point to Jesus, “giving knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guiding our feet into the way of peace.”

Come, join the celebration of what God is doing. Worship the one who is coming, who guides our feet in the way of peace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer/offering

10:00 offering (BELLS)