

“Messengers from God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 6, 2015

Malachi 3: 1-4
Luke 3: 1-6

In the aftermath of the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, James Cook, a reporter for the BBC, said this week, that “it was just another day in the life of the United States of America. Another day of gunfire, panic, and fear” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34991834>).

Unfortunately, he is correct. These acts of violence have become much too common for us. We react with less and less shock, and more and more acceptance as a society. We utter a silent prayer of thanksgiving that this act did not directly impact our lives. Whether it is radical religious fundamentalism or individualized mental derangement, it is all terrorism, for it strikes fear in the hearts of the many.

And what word is on the Advent Wreath for today? Peace. Seems incredibly insensitive following the events of Wednesday. Seems hardly realistic in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, the escalation of violence in our nation, and the unrest we feel in our city surrounding homicides and violent crimes. Peace seems like a fantasy on this Second Sunday of Advent, when we look at the immense struggle we are living through as a human race.

And yet, here is that word, staring at us. While it might be a piece of fabric on this stand, this word embodies a promise. It represents a desire. It is a future that we wait expectantly for in Advent. It is not fantasy – it is what God yearns for as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

How can we seek peace in a world that appears to embrace fear and violence above all else? How can we prepare for God’s peace when our first reaction is often to find emotional and physical safety and security? How do we witness as disciples of the Prince of Peace, when we are tempted to further retreat into isolation from a world that seems threatening and unsafe?

One way we seek to be witnesses of the Prince of Peace is to listen with open ears, open hearts, and open minds to the messengers God sends during Advent. Today, we have two messengers, indeed two prophets, who have a message for God’s people at different times in history, and even for us today. In their Advent messages, we are reminded of what is required of us to welcome the Son of God into our personal lives, and to be instruments of peace not just at Christmas, but each and every day.

The prophet Malachi is speaking to a people who have not pleased the Lord in their worship after returning from exile to Judah. The people wanted God to execute justice over those who had oppressed them. Not believing God had lived up to their expectations, the people drifted away from honoring God in their worship and daily living. The name “Malachi” means “my messenger” in Hebrew, and this prophet has a message from God for his people to hear.

What the people seek – the Lord’s presence – “will suddenly come to (the Lord’s) temple,” as in the messenger of God “in whom you delight” (3:1). But what the people seek may not be what they expect. “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (3:2). When the day of the Lord arrives, the Lord will be like a refiner’s fire: “he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver” (3:3). Only after that refining and purifying by God will the offering of the people “be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years” (3:4).

On the one hand, it is encouraging to hear the prophet tell us that the Lord is coming, and we can trust in the hope he brings. And we want to be present for that coming of the Lord, so that we can witness the restoration of God’s covenant and that our offerings might be pleasing in God’s eyes. We want to see things made right, according to God’s intentions.

On the other hand, that means submitting ourselves to God’s refining fire. That means giving up control and confessing that we have impurities within us that need to be removed. That means change. That means painful self-reflection. Will we prepare for the Prince of Peace on our safe, painless terms, or will we prepare for the Prince of Peace on God’s purifying terms?

Our other prophet today is John the Baptist, and we read that his message echoed what the prophet Isaiah foretold: “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” (Luke 3:5).

Just like Malachi speaks of allowing God to purify ourselves, John speaks to how we need to allow God to make our paths straight, and to smooth out our rough places. Advent is about getting our whole selves ready: body, mind, heart, and soul. And in John we hear the vision that the prophet Isaiah spoke of: “Prepare the way of the Lord – make his paths straight.” John is God’s messenger to the people, and to us, that the one who is being sent is like no other, and will require much of any who wish to follow.

Kathy Beach-Verhey writes: Advent is a season of preparation. But into our Advent “busy-ness” each year enters John the Baptist. He interrupts our schedules and demands that preparations of a different

kind be made. John demands that we get ready for Jesus. In the style of Old Testament prophets before him, John challenges Advent people with a message of personal and corporate self-examination. Advent, John reminds us, is a time to prepare to welcome Jesus and not simply our invited Christmas houseguests.

John's challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (metanoia in Greek) means literally, to change one's mind, turn around, reorient oneself. John calls all people to turn to God and (away) from sin, to seek God's forgiveness, and to prepare the way of the Lord.

(Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 47-49).

The word "repent" has many negative connotations today. Perhaps that is the result of Bible-thumping, fundamentalist religion. In the context of today's passage, however, it is important to reclaim the theological meaning of this crucial biblical word: to turn away from sin, to turn toward God, and to reorient our lives with God at our center.

How straight or crooked are our roads? How smooth or rough are our paths? What makes our roads uneven and crooked? Fear? Sin? Guilt? Brokenness? Do we believe our journey will get easier by holding onto everything from our past? Or do we believe that to travel the road laid before us by God's messengers, we must be willing to let go of our past, and turn our lives over to God?

In our last GriefShare class this week, it was noted that oftentimes, in the midst of our losses, we believe that we only achieve complete healing and peace when we no longer experience pain. That is a misconception of grief. The sign of healing from grief is not an absence of pain; it is the acknowledgement that peace and pain do coexist. Instead, it is a matter of how to live into a new reality after death so that the pain does not consume us.

That spoke to me in light of the events of this week, and in light of our focus on peace on this Second Sunday of Advent. It may be unrealistic to define peace as the absence of pain; the two may very well have to coexist amidst the local, national, and worldly events we experience. But the peace we await this Advent acknowledges the world's pain, and says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

I would like to close with a poem my friend, George Pasley, wrote last week, as it speaks to hope in the midst of hopelessness, and yearning for God's peace in this season of expectant waiting. George writes:

There was a time
When we were instructed to pray
Without ceasing,
And we prayed until we recessed
And then some of us ceased
And I,
I prayed from time to time.

But then one day,
When the nights were long
And the rain was cold
And the news was mostly bad,
I did not despair until I imagined
What the world would become
If we continued on our trajectory
Of anger and violence and fear
And then I despaired, until

Until I remembered the point of unceasing prayer
Is to aim our thoughts towards God,
To imagine peace on earth goodwill
Towards men and women,
Towards the young and old,
For the worn out and otherwise,
All yearning for love, for joy,
And in that imagination,
In that deep yearning,
Hope promises to find us
And spread its cloak
When the nights are long
And the rain is cold
And the news is mostly bad.

So this night I will pray
Until I drift to sleep,
And tomorrow will not be just another day-
It will be the day that the Lord has made,
And I will not despair.
I will endure,
I will love,
Until his kingdom comes.

(George R. Pasley, December 4, 2015, Ketchikan Alaska)

Thanks be to God. Amen.