

December 20, 2020

Do Not Be Afraid to Bring Peace

Luke 1:57-67, 76-79

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You may have seen some of the memes created on the web about this year. One says, *(picture)* “If 2020 were a swing set...” *(picture)* Another says, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Except when you have 2020 lemons:...” And my personal favorite, *(picture)* “If 2020 were a bag of chips, it would be Orange Juice and Toothpaste Flavored”. So many things have left a pretty unpleasant taste in our mouths. So many experiences have felt dissonant and out of tune with the ways we’re used to living our lives.

But sometimes that bad taste in our mouth is what we need to seek a different way forward. I don’t know about you, but I think I see the world differently than I did a year ago. As difficult as this last year has been, an apocalypse – an unveiling and revealing of sorts has also been happening.

There are things I’ve seen and experienced that I wouldn’t have otherwise, like having a front row seat to how my kids learn and adapt. I’ve watched them find ways to cope with adversity and isolation, and deal with it quite a bit better than I do many days. We have witnessed what has happened to sensitive places around the world as human activity has slowed down and the Earth itself has breathed a sigh of relief. People living in India can see the Himalayas for the first time in decades because the air pollution is so much less. Birds have literally changed their tune because they don’t have to combat noise in urban areas in order for other birds to hear them.

At the same time, deep layers of injustice and inequality are also being unveiled. It’s troubling to see tens of millions of people unable to work, struggling to keep a roof over their heads, or food in the fridge, while those whose wealth is largely in the stock market have seen record profits. It is unsettling to see how this pandemic has impacted those who are poorer exponentially more than those who are wealthy. The effects have happened because of the ways our society has set up rules to systematically disadvantage poor people for generations. Even in Rochester, the

number of cases per 100,000 are nearly twice as high in Southeast Rochester where more people live in apartments and lower income housing as they are in Southwest Rochester. That doesn't make one part of town better or worse than another, it just shows that like so many other afflictions, this too takes advantage of those who have fewer defenses available to them.

As difficult as this last year has been, it is not a new situation in human history. Remember that the vast majority of the Bible is written in times of struggle and hardship. Many who first heard the Word were often economically, politically, and socially disadvantaged. God's people were not the movers and shakers of wider society. They were hanger-oners in a society often controlled by powerful outsiders. They persisted by faith that God had been gracious and delivered their people in the past, and they trusted that God would do it again – somehow, and sometime. Life was hard, and finding hope and peace against such odds was an act of sheer faith and courage. The Word of God gave them hope to hold onto and peace to persevere one more season. It had been more than 400 years since a prophet arose from among them to announce a fresh message of God's salvation. I can't imagine that the people were getting a little weary, that their hope was feeling a little worn, and their patience for God's salvation to finally arrive was wearing thin.

And then Zechariah and Elizabeth come along. People must have been whispering to their neighbors. They must have been wondering. It was too much to be coincidental that this old righteous couple were going to have an unexpected baby. If people think that a close spot in a parking lot opening up is a sign from God, than this must have seemed like a Jumbotron sized sign to the people that God was about to do something big. An apocalypse – an unveiling was coming to bring God's salvation and set the people on a whole new path. Zechariah declared, "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, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Zechariah's song, his prophecy, is at the heart of the Advent message – that God is still unveiling salvation, that because of the message of John, and the embodiment of God in Jesus, the world is being saved – even today. It's not militaristic triumphalism,

and it doesn't come in shock & awe. Rather, God's salvation comes in the form of forgiveness and mercy, in compassion for the lowly, the lost, the least, and in a call to those who wait for God to get moving in the way of peace – for this is the only way of Jesus. Any attempt to make God's salvation look otherwise adds to the dissonance of the world in which we already live and should leave an unpleasant taste in our mouths.

The Greek word for peace here looks like harmony. It's not simply an absence of violence, or noise, or a state of being that we find in the woods or by the lake. It is an intentional way of living, of trusting, of being in faithful relationship with God. This way doesn't force us to be exactly like anyone else, but compels us to act in ways that harmonize and accentuate the love and grace of God. This kind of peace and harmony is to be pursued and acted upon in order to unveil God's peace for us and for the world.

Eugene Peterson writes in his book, *The Jesus Way*, that *“To follow Jesus means picking up rhythms and ways of doing things that are often unsaid but always derivative from Jesus, formed by the influence of Jesus. To follow Jesus means that we can't separate what Jesus is saying from what Jesus is doing and the way that he does it. To follow Jesus is as much, or maybe even more, about feet as it is about ears and eyes.”*

I read a story this week about Sarah Culbertson. Sarah was born in Sierra Leon and adopted by a West Virginian family when she was about one. In 2004, when Sarah was 28, she found out that she was a legitimate African princess. Her birth father was a paramount chief and part of one of the largest tribes of Sierra Leonean people. She travelled to Sierra Leon to meet her family. In her travels, she saw the fear and suspicion that people lived with after a long civil war. It had been a couple years since the war had ended but people were living in the traumatic aftermath of war. Children were often missing limbs, people looked hungry, and scared. When she discovered that she was a princess, Sarah didn't know what that meant. All she knew of princesses was what she had learned from Disney. But what she encountered as a new princess was far from the Disney fantasy, but it was also far more meaningful.

She didn't inherit a whole lot of wealth, but she did inherit a tremendous amount of responsibility. She was expected to repair buildings, promote safety, and develop hope and peace to her war-weary people. She and her biological brother developed a foundation and got to work. They have provided safe drinking water to more than 12,000 people, and during COVID are leading the "Mask On Africa" effort to keep people safe. Sarah has set her feet on the way of peace, living in harmony with the ways of Jesus.

We can't separate what Jesus says from what Jesus does. In Advent, we see and hear what God is about to do in Jesus - salvation is coming bringing peace, mercy, forgiveness, hope, joy, and love. In Advent, we who call on Jesus in our need, who trust in Jesus with our lives, get ready to put our feet to work in the Jesus way. There may continue to be dissonance in the world. There may continue to be times when injustice leaves an unpleasant taste in our mouths. And yet, the dawn from on high is breaking upon us, and because of that, we know what the rhythms and sounds of salvation are. May this way be music to our ears that moves us ever more in the way of Christ's peace. Amen.