

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
2nd Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Today we lit the candle of peace on our Advent wreath. What do you think of when you hear the word peace? A tiny sleeping baby wrapped in swaddling clothes? A day at the spa? A world where children can go to high school and not worry for their lives? A beautiful garden? A walk on the beach? Living without fear of one another? Being comfortable in your own skin? What is the peace that you long for?

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, tells us in the beautiful canticle that we recited together this morning:

*In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

God promises peace. God's kingdom is peace. We call Jesus, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace. Today's readings tell us a lot about the peace that God promises. It is not merely an absence of conflict. Paul writes his beautiful words of peace from prison, after all. Peace in God's terms is a deep, abiding sense of rightness even in the face of struggles. It's a sense of being at home, of being on the right path. We hear this morning that God's peace doesn't remove us from the struggles of the world. It opens us up to see them and face them and allow God to transform them in and through us. God's peace is not a sentimental feeling. In fact, it just may involve bulldozers!

These readings remind me of my frequent drives to Chicago to visit my grandkids and their parents. On those drives there is one thing I can always count on. Construction! I will be flying along, thinking about that first hug or kiss from one of my sweet grandbabies or what might be for lunch when I arrive. Inevitably, I have to slow down to accommodate changed road patterns or heavy equipment or flashing warning signs. It slows me down and it's inconvenient. But then, the next time I drive up there, I can see the results - smoother roads, safer passage, a better flow of traffic for everyone. The problem is it never seems to be done. I wonder what it will be like one day to drive from here to my daughter's house on smooth, clean roads that have been prepared for today's traffic?

God's peace involves changing patterns, too. We don't just wait for it. We prepare that it may come to pass. The prophet Malachi tells us that the day of the Lord will be ushered in after a period of refinement and purification, a time of heavy construction we might say.

Luke's introduction of John the Baptist also involves some serious re-routing. He begins with a long list of the rulers of the day, both secular and religious leaders. These are the ones we might expect God to use to prepare the way for great things. But, no, it is John, a nobody in the wilderness who paves the way for the Prince of Peace. It is John, insignificant as he is, to whom the word of the Lord comes, not the powerful and mighty of the world. The peace that God offers us means patterns will have to change, routes will be reworked. Bulldozers will move out whatever it is that stands in the way of wholeness and reconciliation.

This project, though, is not ours alone. Our job is to clear the way, to straighten out the crooked parts and leave the road wide open. It is God who will fill every valley and bring down every hill and mountain. God will level the ground and bring light and life to those trapped in darkness and death's shadow.

Our job is to turn toward the light that is Christ and allow it to change us, to prepare us to receive God's gift of peace. When John calls us to repent, he is not asking us to just say "oops, I'm sorry". He is calling us to transformation, to a complete change of mind and heart. The writer David Roberts says it well, "repentance isn't a momentary instance of remorse and forgiveness, but rather a journey of transformation. It is about enlightenment, being transfigured through restoring and deepening our union with God and others. It is about seeing the world as it might be, where hate, injustice and violence are no longer. It is about seeing swords shaped into ploughshares. Repentance is about hope, not fear."

What are your deepest hopes this Advent? What kind of transformation do you long for? The preparation of Advent calls us to ask ourselves: Are we carrying grudges that we need to submit to the bulldozer? What prejudices right here in this congregation need to be razed so that peace may come to all flesh? What addictions among us need to be faced and brought into the light? Where do you long for peace in your life?

John calls us to prepare the way. Not just for a sweet baby, not just for a season, but for an earthshattering transformation. For shalom. For healing and wholeness. And that takes some work, some construction, some re-routing. It takes the courage and wisdom to step into the silence and listen for the rumbles of change. It takes courage to look deeply within at the crooked things that need to be straightened out so that God may travel with us. It may take speaking some hard truths to ourselves and to those we love. It will ask us to take an honest look at the obstacles we put in the path of others that keep them from shalom, from healing and wholeness.

This morning, let's bring on the bulldozers and prepare the way. Let's pray for the courage to be peacemakers. Remembering that God is the author of our peace. Let's take these

days of Advent to step back and look within and all around us at the things that need to be brought down and the things that need to be raised up. That on Christmas morning, we are ready to receive again and to truly follow the Prince of Peace.