

Advent 2 (C)

December 8, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church,

Laurel Springs, NJ

The Song of Zechariah

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

This Isn't the Way It's Supposed to Be

Have you ever thought to yourself,

“This isn't the way it supposed to be?”

Maybe it is the latest reports of rockets falling in Israel or missiles being fired on Ukraine. Maybe it is the images of the security fence along the West Bank. Maybe it is the number of murders reported each night by David Muir in major US cities. Maybe it is another mass shooting.

Maybe it was the story of the mother of an aspiring 13-year-old cheerleader hiring a hitman to kill the mother of a rival cheerleader.

Maybe it is the price of eggs and butter as you grocery shop for supplies for your holiday favorites. Maybe it was the latest family gathering that ended in shouting. Maybe it was the stupid thing I said when I should have just kept my mouth shut. This just isn't the way it's supposed to be.

If you have ever felt this way, then you have a sense of the biblical concept of sin. As you may have noticed, it is complex. Two things are actually going on when you say, “**This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.**” First of all, you have a sense that something is not right. But there is also something else. In order to say that something is not right, you also need a vision of what is right- how things are supposed to be. So, sin, in the biblical tradition, is a derivative concept. First, you must have a sense of what is right. Only then can you say something is wrong.

In the biblical tradition, the vision of how things are to be is called **shalom**. We translate this word as *peace*, but it means so much more than an absence of warfare or a calm state of mind. Shalom or Peace in the scripture means universal flourishing, wholeness, harmony, delight. Carmen has spoken to us about this many times. The prophet spoke of a time when crooked places would be made straight , when rough places would be made smooth, when flowers will bloom in the desert, when weeping would cease, when the lion would lie down with the lamb, when foolish would be made wise, when the wise would be made humble, when humans would beat their swords into plowshares. All nature would be fruitful and benign, all nations sit down together for sumptuous feast, All creation would look to God, walk with God, and delight in God.

As Cornelius Plantinga say in his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, shalom is defined as, a “***Rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts from fully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its creator and Savior open stores and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.***” In the Bible, shalom, or peace, is the way things are supposed to be.

Sin, the way things aren't supposed to be is the violation of shalom. Of course, sin is an affront to God, but it is an affront to God because it breaks God's peace. And what breaks God's peace? Twisting the good things of creation so that they serve unworthy ends. Splitting apart things that belong together. Putting together things that are to be kept apart. The corruption of personal and social and natural integrity. A moments reflection or a look at the evening news can easily supply specific examples.

Now, all this talk about sin may sound like a bit of a downer. Especially on December 8. Many of us are getting into the holiday spirit. Decorating the tree. Making Christmas cookies. Listening to Christmas carols. Sending Christmas cards. Wrapping presents. Feeling jolly. - although for me, personally, I have not done a single one of those things- not yet. We even came to church this morning! But instead of baby Jesus

and the heavenly chorus of angels, we get John the Baptist, “ a rough prophet prowling around in the Judean wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Not exactly, “holly, jolly Christmas! (as my new Messy Church Christmas pjs said yesterday!)

But here’s the strange thing. We still refer to John’s message as good news. After the gospel lesson was read, I, as your Deacon, had the audacity to say, “The gospel of the Lord.” That is another way of saying, “The Good News of the Lord.” How can this be? Some of us will say, “no way”. An Old Testament prophet wagging his finger at us and calling us all sinners is definitely not good news. Others of us may be willing to admit the importance of John’s message, but only as a prelude to good news, something we must do to get ready for the good news of the birth of a savior. We need to go through the hard process of acknowledging and repenting of our sins so that we may make ourselves ready for the gift of Christ. It may be a necessary process, but we still would not call it good news. The doctor who tells us we have to give up fatty foods and start exercising may be telling us the truth we need to hear, but we do not really rejoice and burst into song when we hear it.

And yet there is a way that John's love message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins can actually be seen as good news, and not just as necessary, grit our teeth and get through it prelude to good news. After reading the lesson I said, "The gospel of the Lord," And you all responded not with a palm up, puzzled expression, but with, "Praise to you, Lord Christ." We can really mean it. But how?

I think we can see John the Baptist proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the Forgiveness of sins as good news in three ways. First, if we hear John's message and it rings true, if we have ever said, "this is not the way things are supposed to be," then we already know God's peace. As noted before, in the biblical view, sin is a derivative concept. We must already have a vision of how things are to be if we feel as though things are not that way. We must have some sense of God's peace, to know when it is broken. And this is good news. We do have a vision of God's shalom, God's peace. It has been given to us in our scriptures, and then our religious traditions, and in our reflection on creation. We have been given a vision of the world as created and redeemed by our good and generous God, a world made to be fruitful, abundant, Harmonious, life-giving, peaceful, whole, filled with deep and abiding joy. If we hear and respond to John's message about sin, then we must already know about God's peace. And that is good news.

A second way we can see John's message as good news is that if we hear and respond to his call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, then we must believe that there is something we can do about it. John is not saying things are not the way they are supposed to be and they never will be; get used to it. His is not a message of futility in the face of the brokenness of God's creation. Rather, it is a liberating and joyful call to realign our individual and collective wills with the purposes of God. If we already know of God's vision of shalom, we can be a people who promote flourishing, seeking wholeness and restore harmony. We can be repairers of the breach. To hear and respond to John's message is good news, because although things aren't the way they should be, they can change and so can we. People can stop killing each other. Hungry people can get fed. Parents can love their families and raise healthy children. People can stop hurting each other. Enemies can become friends. It is good, and indeed joyful news to know that we are free to respond to God's call to shalom.

Finally, we can hear John's message about a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as good news because if we already know God's peace, if we can respond to the call of God's peace, then in some deep way we already trust in the eventual triumph of God's peace.

In our gospel lesson, John is described in the words of the prophet Isaiah as:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the Way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

It is an emphatic message; **all flesh shall see the salvation of God.** And this is good news, the Good News. Yes, things are not the way they are supposed to be, but we already know God’s vision of shalom. We can turn our hearts and minds to God’s purposes. And we can trust that someday things will be put to rights, all tears will be wiped away, all swords will be beat into plowshares and all flesh will see the salvation of God. God and God’s peace will be triumphant in the end. And we know this because in the birth of Jesus, these eyes of ours have seen the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and he shall be called **Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.**

No, things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be. We know this because we already know God’s peace. Through a process of repentance, we can align ourselves with God’s purposes, God’s shalom, the way things are

supposed to be. And we can do this in a spirit of gratitude, joy, and trust because we have been given the promise of the eventual triumph of God's shalom in the birth of a baby who is the Prince of Peace.

And that my siblings in Christ, is Good News indeed!