

Isaiah 12: 2 - 6
Phil. 4: 4 – 7
Luke 3: 7 – 18
Advent III

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“The Peace of God”

It must have been a remarkable scene. So many people, fearful of a world that seemed to be crashing in on them, searched for answers. The world around them, the comfortable world they had grown up in, seemed increasingly alien. Mysterious dark powers seemed to hover over them, and their future and the future of their children seemed bleak, indeed. They wondered about those who lived among them; the strangers and the aliens – were they the cause of all this suffering and fear? How had things gone so wrong? How could they become safe again? Would they ever be safe again?

They searched for someone who might lead them back to peace and prosperity. Almost nobody trusted the people in leadership for they were all in thrall to power and money for themselves. But so many of the possible saviors turned out to be false prophets, charlatans really, filled with smooth, comforting words, but, in the end, did nothing. All talk, no action. And things kept getting worse. So, the people waited, with increasing anxiety, for the one leader they so desperately wanted. Then one day they heard of a new voice – one crying in the wilderness – a voice not from power, not from the city, not from the usual leader group, a stranger, a wild man but with a compelling voice calling for a new time and new ways for the people. So they went out from the city and the villages to hear this prophet.

And he calls them vipers! Imagine that we have trekked out into the hot and forbidding desert, seeking comforting words for ourselves and maybe some nice condemnation for our enemies. We are looking for assurances that we are God’s people and God will smite our enemies and return us to our accustomed place of comfort and privilege. God will help us by destroying those we name to God as enemies and then we, and we know who we are, will sit down to a great banquet. Such speeches have been given since the before history. They are being offered today. The world, we are told by some, is divided into us and them and those who would lead us let us know who is us and who is them and promise to get rid of them. John the Baptist did not read that book on how to get picked as the people’s prophet. John the Baptist was picked by God to be God’s prophet bringing God’s message.

But we have another stump speech to consider this morning, Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It, too, is a message to people wondering about the future, fearful of events happening in their lives, and desirous of finding peace and prosperity in their day. This speech is almost a polar opposite to John’s fiery address. Putting them together into a pastiche reveals this:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’ for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to

God. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Taken together these two readings offer us a three-part message about the new covenant and John the Baptist’s sermon captures all three elements. The first is the prophetic warning about judgment to come and the condemnation of business as usual. John is warning that membership in the tribe of Israel is insufficient evidence of righteousness for membership in the new covenant. God has chosen Israel, but John reminds the audience that God can just as easily choose stones as heirs to heaven and indeed, later, Jesus will be depicted as the new cornerstone of the new Temple. For the chosen people have erred and fallen away from their part of the covenant and God is not happy. John brackets his sermon with prophetic warnings at both the beginning and the end as he strikes the powerful image of wheat and chaff being separated – one for keeping and the other for burning. The choice is abundantly clear and it is made not to our enemies but to us. Change or perish.

The second part of the message forms the core of John’s sermon and Paul’s exhortation. It is the message of a call to justice, compassion, and peace towards all people. For John this commitment to social justice at the personal and direct level of action is the means by which one shows that one is a tree that bears good fruit and thus, worthy of repentance. It is not enough to change one’s words; repentance means a physical turning away from old ways and a clear demonstration that one is acting in new ways. John is not, however, preaching revolution against all authority or structure. Even the poor hated tax collectors and mercenary soldiers working for the hated Romans can continue in their work; they are merely constrained to do their work fairly and honestly. For Paul, who earlier in his letter laid out similar admonitions; here simply iterates the need for gentleness towards all; a reminder of the primacy of community.

The third part of the message is the imminent fulfillment of the Coming of the Messiah. In John’s sermon he makes it abundantly clear that the Messiah is coming and will be greater than all the prophets that Israel has known. And for Paul, writing after the earthly life and ministry of Christ Jesus has been completed, he reminds his audience that Christ will come again. Thus worries about the outcomes of this life are of far less importance than being prepared for the coming of the Lord who is near. It speaks to the end-times when all earthly concerns will pass away.

We, too, ask, “What then should we do?” We, too, live in tumultuous and perilous times. The answer is the same as it was for John’s followers, for Paul’s little congregations, and for us as followers of Christ Jesus. We can only bring about the peace of God if we change our ways. We must share, we must treat all others with dignity and compassion, and we must build up all communities. We still need to turn our lives toward God; we still need to speak the truth in love and love our neighbor as ourselves, but we can do so in the sure and certain hope that we are forgiven. For the peace of God has truly descended upon us; won for us by the coming of a child to live as one of us and to die as we will die. But through that special death, we, too, can escape the death of our souls and be offered the joys of life eternal with our Creator.

The peace of God. We invoke it often even though we don't understand it. It surely does pass all human understanding. But we've got it even if we don't always get it. This Advent, share the peace of God with someone you love. Better yet, share the peace of God with someone you don't. Amen.