



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the Way of Peace

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 6, 2009

Second Sunday in Advent (Year C)

Luke 1:68-79

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*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
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,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

One of the stories I remember my grandmother telling when I was a child was one about whose sequence of events my grandparents disagreed. According to my grandfather, the pastor had asked him to stand up and sing a solo in the middle of one of his sermons, which he did happily. That part of the story isn't disputed. What they never could agree on—at least the way I remember it—is whether or not my grandfather sang on the right Sunday or not.

That story pops into my mind any time I hear or read this story from Luke's Gospel that tells how old Zechariah broke into song at the birth of John the Baptist—the one

who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. In fact, if you were to read the gospel lesson assigned for this Sunday, you'd see John standing out in the wilderness, and you could hear his voice ringing out the prophet Isaiah's words from long ago: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight his paths. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

John's birth wasn't anything Zechariah thought would ever happen. He and his wife were growing older—the hopes for a child had grown dim—when the angel came with the news that they would give birth to a son who would prepare the way for the messiah. Zechariah struggled to believe that message, so he got to spend several months in silence—time he spent praying and reflecting about what God's messenger had told him.

So when his son was born and the time for naming came, Zechariah—the one silent for so many days—suddenly proclaimed, "His name is John." And before you knew it, Zechariah was up and singing, "Blest be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free. Who visits and redeems us, who grants us victory. The prophets spoke of mercy, of freedom and release, God shall fulfill that promise and bring the people peace."

In Zechariah's song, we get some amazing news: Our merciful God is going to act, which is exactly what we are longing for. In fact, that's what Advent is about—our waiting and hoping for God to tear open the heavens and come down, to act, to set things right. And Zechariah sings of the day when God will give light to people who were sitting in darkness (do you hear the echoes of Isaiah). But that wasn't the only news. Zechariah also announced that God is going to lead us in the way of peace.

That phrase jumped off the page at me this year. "In the way of peace." So often we hear phrases like "the way of life," or "the way of truth," or even "the way of the Cross," and they all have power. But this year especially, that phrase jumped off the page for me because I am convinced we are living far from peace.

Of course, to believe that, you may have to redefine how you understand peace. Peace, you see, isn't just the absence of conflict, but rather a peace that heals and makes whole. It's the Hebrew understanding of Shalom—of a wholeness in which things are right and whole and all of your relationships—with others, with yourself, with God—all of them are good and right and life-giving. To be led in the way of peace is to be led in the way where things are as God has promised they will be.

So why is peace so elusive? That phrase—in the way of peace—jumped out at me this year because I heard it in a new way—in a way I'd never thought of it before. There are, after all, many things that are in the way of peace—that get in the way of the peace we long for within ourselves and between us and others or God.

I've had a lot of those things in my way of peace over the last 24 hours. I've joked with a few of you this morning that I planned to speak about peace from a particularly unsettled place today. You see, I've never lived anywhere in my life where it only snows

on Saturday or Sunday. While the world talks about snow quieting things and slowing things down—while I check the Facebook status updates from my friends and see their smiling faces and those of their children standing by architecturally perfect snowmen and read about snow cream and how absolutely perfect it all is—all I can think is, “Yeah, I’d feel that way too if it were happening on any other day of the week.” But even as I shoveled the driveway and built snowmen and played with the kids and enjoyed the beauty, all sorts of other things were running through my mind: what about the Girl Scout project, and how will we move everything off the fellowship hall stage for the pageant rehearsal; will we ever find the key that one of those scouts dropped on the way back to her house from mine; will we get to have church; will Gretchen and her family make it for the baptism—question after question, thought after thought, worry after worry, and before I knew it the gentleness that descended over the county and the hush seemed like distant memories. And that phrase kept coming back to me: “God will lead us in the way of peace.” And then another, fuller phrase, “God will lead us in the way of peace...no matter how many things are in the way of peace.”

In other words, the God who can bring mountains and hills low and lift up valleys and make the rough places smooth can also prepare the way inside of us, quieting our souls and stilling our fears. And when that blessed peace descends into our hearts and souls, amazing things can happen.

Perhaps you remember a phrase that used to be heard a lot when the Cold War ended. It was called the “peace dividend.” The thought was that because we no longer needed so much money spent on weapons to defend ourselves against the weapons of others, there would be a large quantity of money available to spend on development and hunger and poverty and all sorts of other things.

Rowan Williams writes that the way of Jesus brings a peace dividend as well. The peace dividend that is made possible by Jesus is *not* a peace that is just the absence of rivalry and conflict; it is an active condition of loving and nurturing, giving and receiving, (of) mutuality” (Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 102).

Ann Weems, one of my favorite poets, gets close to this in a poem from her book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. She writes,

*Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem
but running away.
We ought to know by now that we can't see
where we're going in the dark.
Running away is rampant...
separation is stylish:
separation from mates, from friends, from self.
Run and tranquilize,*

*don't talk about it,
 avoid.
 Run away and join the army
 of those who have already run away.
 When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
 comes only when we turn and face the darkness?
 Only then will we be able to see
the Light of the World.*

God, you see, is the one who has power to give us peace. In just a moment, we will baptize Gretchen. She will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

When I talked with Gretchen about this, I tried to help her know that she will be doing a lot of things in life—and will be identified by a lot of names. But in baptism, she will be given her true and deeper identity—she is God's beloved child.

What I didn't say then, but will for all of us now, is that living out of that baptismal identity can give us a deep and lasting peace—a peace that fills our lives with energy for service in Christ's name. It's a peace, sings Zechariah, that lets us serve God without fear all of our days.

So as those who have been claimed by God's grace, let us stand and join Zechariah in his song: (The congregation sings hymn 602 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*.)

*Blest be the God of Israel, Who comes to set us free;
 Who visits and redeems us, Who grants us liberty.
 The prophets spoke of mercy, Of freedom and release;
 God shall fulfill that promise And bring the people peace.*

*God from the house of David A child of grace has given;
 A Savior comes among us To raise us up to heaven.
 Before Him goes the herald, Forerunner in the way,
 The prophet of salvation, The harbinger of day.*

*On those who sit in darkness The sun begins to rise,
 The dawning of forgiveness Upon the sinner's eyes.
 God guides the feet of pilgrims Along the paths of peace.
 O bless our God and Savior With songs that never cease!*