

“We Light One Candle for Peace”
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The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH
6 December, 2015, Advent 2C
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-79, 3:2b-6

Which of us has never silently wished, or even cried aloud, “Oh God, what am I supposed to do now?! Just *tell me!*” It’s the cry of one in need of salvation, and I guess every one of us has experienced it at one point or another in life. If you can’t remember ever thinking such thoughts, then chances are pretty good that you will before long.

Human beings in every generation have longed for a clear word from God—distinct, crisply articulated, undeniable sounds from the Almighty that spell out exactly what needs to be done in order to make things right: to secure happiness, security, peace. Especially in times of crisis, upheaval, and recognized vulnerability, individuals and faith communities, and sometimes entire nations, offer up this prayer (“God, tell us what to do!”) in all sorts of ways.

We long for a messenger, the bringer of salvation, and yet we so often ignore him or shun her, because the message is not what we want to hear, or it doesn’t come packaged the way we want or expect it to. We know we want liberation, but so often we’re unaware of what it is that actually enslaves us. That is, we identify what we *think* we need to be saved from, but often there are deeper issues at play—and we don’t want to change the more fundamental things about ourselves or our way of life that must shift, in order to know the security and peace we long for.

The tragic events that transpired in San Bernadino, CA, on Wednesday, the latest in the recent spate of terrorist attacks and mass shootings both at home and abroad, have given rise to new cries for the wisdom and word of God to be bold and clear, as our nation has heard leaders and layfolk alike lament yet again the depravity of some human hearts and minds; as well as the blight of gun violence on our culture, and the confounded gridlock we have over how to address it meaningfully, constructively; and the rising spectre of terrorism by individuals who corrupt and misrepresent the truth and message of the Muslim faith.

The vast majority of ordinary people simply want to live peaceful lives; ask a random sampling if they could have any wish in the world fulfilled, and I’m confident many of them would say “World peace.”

Across the pages of Scripture, and throughout the history of the world, God has always provided prophets to give voice to the divine desire for every person to know the joy salvation. However, almost just as consistently, those *yearning* to hear have *failed* to hear or *recognize* God’s words being expressed.

Malachi, the last prophet's voice to sound from the pages of our Old Testament, comes to the people of Israel with words of hope and peace—but also honest words of challenge and judgment. “The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—he *is* coming,” the prophet reassures his people. “But,” he continues, “who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? He’s like a refiner’s fire; like fuller’s soap.”

Malachi’s original audience would have understood that a refiner’s fire is blazing hot; hot enough to burn away impurities that weaken or compromise raw metal ore. And fuller’s soap was a sort of bleaching, scouring, purifying cleanser that was used to make wool softer and more consistent in texture, a superior product when it was woven together. In both cases, the material being strengthened and purified was being changed for the better in the process.

The divine Savior Malachi referenced would be one who would purify the people—and when they’d been purified, purged of the things that compromised their faithfulness to God and one another, *then* they would enjoy the peace they were pursuing, the fullness of joy they longed for. But, as Malachi (and all the other prophets before him) made clear, the process wasn’t going to be easy or entirely pleasant—though the end result would be more than worth it.

If Malachi is the last prophet we hear from in our Old Testament, then the two we heard from in our lesson from Luke’s gospel are among the first of the New Testament. Prophets are individuals who remind the people of God’s faithfulness, who call us back to an awareness of what God wants (and has always wanted) from us, and they extend a vision for what life will look like if and when we turn *away* from our self-centered behaviors and turn back **wholeheartedly** toward God. John the Baptist, and his father Zechariah, are both represented as prophetic figures in Luke’s gospel.

Did you know that they’re also considered prophets to the Islamic faith? Many of you probably know that Islam reveres Jesus as a holy man, a prophet and exemplar of faithfulness. But it may surprise some of you to learn that Zechariah and John the Baptist are also identified as prophets in the Qur’an. Zechariah in particular is frequently praised in the Muslim holy book as a prophet of God and a righteous man¹; in fact, there are several stories about his exemplary prayerfulness and faith. There are significant differences between our faith traditions, but at a time when much is being done to vilify and demonize more than 1.5 billion peace-loving, faithful Muslim people as if they were of the same ilk as the small minority of depraved zealots, love and justice demands that the truth is told and bridges of understanding are built wherever possible.

Zechariah was a priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, and he knew what it meant to live in hope. He and his wife Elizabeth had hoped and prayed for many years for a child, but remained barren. Finally, Luke reports, in their old age the angel Gabriel gave them the good news that they would be parents to an extraordinary child. Their son, whom they

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zechariah_%28priest%29

were instructed to give the divinely-chosen name of *John*, would help to pave the way for God's entrance into the world. Their son's life would not be easy, he'd be a bit of an eccentric child and a wild man in his prime—but he would help to change the world and introduce others to a life of peace. When Zechariah's petitions were answered, he sang the prayer of adoration and blessing we heard in our Gospel lesson. Did you hear the themes reverberating with our Advent themes of darkness and light, human hope, the longing for peace, and the mercy of God?

Zechariah's faith and experience surely served as an example to his son. Long before he became known as the Baptist, John must have heard a good number of stories from Zechariah about how prayer and trust in God was both a discipline and a blessing; how practicing his faith gave him hope, courage, and confidence to listen for and actually hear God's voice.

As a young man, this cousin of Jesus was able to renounce all concerns about what the world might have to say about him. He made his home in the wilderness—which in itself was symbolic. [Away from the potentially numbing and dulling creature comforts available to him in town, closer to the wildness and wonder of God's creation, John chose to survive on locusts and honey, on God's daily provision, with no certainty about where his next meal was coming from.] As the second part of our gospel lesson said, he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he encouraged people to "Prepare the way of the Lord." (Luke 2:3) With poetic language that echoed previous prophets, John proclaimed that the valleys would be filled and the mountains made low, that the crooked would be made straight and the rough ways made smooth. In other words, there was hope for life becoming less tumultuous and painful. *And*, he said, "and *all* flesh shall see the salvation of God." His words, like those of Malachi and other Old Testament prophets before him, were both reassuring and challenging—especially for a people who thought of themselves exclusively as God's chosen ones.

At the beginning of our service, during the lighting of our Advent wreath, we acknowledged that "peace is a word that we hear a lot. It's one of the things that we hope for, and one of the things that we proclaim that Christ brought when he came to us." But what does that mean?

What we translate into English as the word *peace* in our scripture texts, is the Hebrew word *shalom*. *Shalom* actually incorporates the concepts of wholeness, health, harmony, completeness—as well as the concept of peace. And I think that when we're crying out for salvation, these are the things we are calling upon God to deliver. Our bodies and souls yearn for *shalom*. That's surely one reason why "shalom" has come to be used as a greeting and parting blessing; we long for shalom for ourselves, and we pray it for our neighbor.

Jesus Christ, whom we also refer to at this time of year as Emmanuel *and* as Prince of Peace: the One whom we have received as God incarnate, brought shalom, peace, wholeness. He brought restoration in his person when God in Christ Jesus took on flesh and came to dwell among us. To everyone who was open to receiving it, Jesus brought peace

and healing—both physical and spiritual. He embraced the person as they were and invited them into a deeper appreciation of their full humanity. Jesus enabled broken people to embrace their life with all of its complexities and, by turning to God, to overcome their fears as they replaced old habits with new ones that made them feel more fully alive.

Last week, we lit one candle for hope—the first light against the darkness of the world we inhabit. This week, we keep that light of hope burning, and we light a candle for peace.

It may be the case that you have an Advent wreath of your own at home—and if you do, then I hope you'll re-use the Advent liturgies we're using each Sunday. But even if you don't have an Advent wreath, I encourage you to consider lighting two candles at some point each day this week: light one candle for hope. Offer a prayer of thanks for the hope that you find welling up within you. And then, against the darkness and chaos of the world that seems increasingly filled with fear, violence, and terrorism, light a candle for peace. Let it burn as you pray for your own experience of peace and salvation, and when you extinguish the candle, imagine the light travelling to specific individuals and places in need of hope and of peace across the earth.

In the United Church of Christ, our denominational motto is, "God is still speaking," May you and I be those prophets of peace who bring the clear word of God—a message of hope, repentance, salvation, and peace, shalom—to a world desperate to hear it. In Jesus' name, the Prince of Peace. Amen.