

# Taking the Next Step Toward Peace

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

There is a columnist for the St. Paul Pioneer Press with whom I rarely agree and who I often find more than a little annoying. I generally ignore his column altogether, but the column last Sunday was on climate change and the Climate Conference in Paris. Like a moth drawn to a fire, curiosity got the best of me. I picked it up and began to read. It was as bad as I thought. He refers to those attending the Conference as charlatans and for himself gladly embraces the title “Climate Change Denier”. From where I sit climate change denier is being a little too kind. It would be more accurate to simply embrace the title reality denier. Heat records continue to be broken year after year, extreme droughts, floods, hurricanes, not to mention melting ice-caps and near unanimous agreement among scientists. How can anyone be so disconnected from reality as to continue holding onto these beliefs in the face of mounting and overwhelming evidence to the contrary?

This, of course, is precisely the problem we face during the season of Advent, and especially on this the Second Sunday of Advent. We have an almost embarrassing disconnect between what we proclaim and the reality of our lives and world. Our opening hymn says it all, “O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and discord, cease, fill the whole world with heavens peace.”

In song, in word, in prayer, in sacred text, we hear the promise of peace. We proclaim peace and terrorists bomb Paris, killing 129 and injuring 135. We proclaim peace and a gunman opens fire at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Denver, killing three, injuring 9. We proclaim peace and bombs are daily dropped in Syria. We proclaim peace and James Clark an unarmed black man is shot to death by police in Minneapolis. We proclaim peace and 14 are killed, 17 wounded in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. We proclaim peace in a country awash with guns leading the world in mass shootings.

We proclaim the Prince of Peace, but when we open the daily paper we appear to be no more in touch with reality than do those who continue denying the existence of climate change. The evidence of violence and its grip on our world appears overwhelming and getting stronger every day. We look like reality deniers.

At the center of our Gospel lesson today is a priest who found himself in much the same predicament we find ourselves in today. Every Sabbath he is called to get up and proclaim a promise that flies in the face of reality. The prophets of old spoke of God's promise to make of Israel a great nation, one that would be a blessing to all people, defeating their enemies, bringing peace and justice to the land. The evidence at hand is a far cry from this promise. The oppressive power of Rome is fully in charge with no end in sight. Zechariah looks and feels like a reality denier.

To make matters worse, Zechariah continues going through the motions of offering his own personal petition to God. He and his wife Elizabeth are without a child. The prayer has become something Zechariah repeats without even thinking. He could text and pray this prayer at the same time. “Please God, give us a child with whom to share our lives”. Luke tells us Zechariah and Elizabeth are old and in those days there was no Viagra. The likelihood of Zechariah becoming a father is next to zero. Denying all evidence to the contrary, Zechariah, half-heartedly prays, perhaps in the way we sometimes half-heartedly pray for peace, “Please God, give us a child with whom to share our lives.” There appears to be a huge disconnect between what Zechariah proclaims and the reality of his life and world.

Those of us who continue singing and speaking of peace in a world of violence can readily understand Zechariah’s skepticism when the angel Gabriel appears telling him to get the nursery ready for their new son. If you have been going through the motions, without really believing in the possibility of life being any different than all the evidence suggests, it is a hard thing to suddenly change course and get ready to have your life and world be any different than the way it is.

It is in response to Zechariah’s understandable skepticism about a child, about peace, about life ever being different than the way it is now, that the angel Gabriel says, this seems like a good time for you to have an extended period of silence, like nine months or so. Now it could very

well be that for Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, this time of silence for Zechariah comes as a bit of a relief. I can think of a few politicians and talk show hosts that I would gladly see be given 9 months of silence.

One of the norms commonly lifted up in the Antiracism Study Dialogue Circles led by Okogyeamon is a practice of monitoring one's air time. The norm is established because some of us, particularly those of who are white males, have grown accustomed to speaking out and having our voices heard. It is not altogether our fault. At an early age boys, especially boys who are white, get called upon by teachers with greater frequency. We naturally come to assume that is the way it should be. ASDIC's norm for monitoring air time is intended to provide other voices an opportunity to be heard. Elizabeth is finally having an opportunity to say what she really thinks and may not be at all unhappy about Zechariah's 9 months of silence.

One seldom thinks of silence as an essential ingredient for justice. But, imagine the difference it might make if dominant western nations such as the U.S. quit speaking long enough so that the voices of Island Nations concerned about climate change and rising seas might be heard.

As important as silence may have been for Elizabeth, silence appears to have been essential for Zechariah. If we are seldom quiet, if we rarely make room for silence than how can we possibly listen? Silence, of course, is much more than the absence of sound. I can be literally silent while my mind sounds like a crowd at the mall with

constant chatter and constant noise. Our worship often includes the ancient practice of meditative singing that can help quiet those very voices. Real silence is about creating the space where we can truly listen.

In our age of 24 hour news cycles, constant messaging, tweeting, sound that seldom stops, it may be that one of the most important things we have to offer the world is the reminder that silence is needed, silence is essential for finding a pathway toward peace, both peace in our own lives and peace in our world.

Maybe Zechariah needed the whole nine months of silence. Hopefully we can get by with a little less. But here is what Zechariah discovers in the silence. Joy is essential for peace. According to Luke, Zechariah bursts forth in a song of blessing and praise, not just for what God was doing in his life with the birth of their child, but more importantly what God is doing in our world. Peace is accompanied by joy. By creating places and spaces of true joy we are taking steps toward peace.

In the silence Zechariah is reminded that there is an ancient wisdom from the prophets which still holds true, a wisdom that speaks of God's covenantal relationship with us and all creation. Peace is accompanied by the wisdom that we live in relationship. By creating places where relationships can flourish we taking steps toward peace.

Zechariah is reminded that fear is the enemy of peace. Fear causes

us to create enemies, build walls against enemies, arm ourselves against enemies, but in the silence Zechariah discovers that it is fear itself that is the enemy of peace. By letting go of fear and trusting the one who shows tender mercy, we are taking steps toward peace..

The silence broken by Zechariah in a song of praise concludes with these words. “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”. There is no grand promise that the way to peace is easy or that it will always look as if it is guaranteed or just around the corner.

What we are promised is that if we are willing to listen, if we make room in the silence, then by the tender mercy of our God, our feet will be guided in the ways of peace. A few days ago Michele and I had an opportunity to do some hiking along trails on the North Shore. Several of those trails followed rivers. There were dry spots and there were icy spots. The trails required our full attention. There was no rushing down the path. It was one step at a time.

This is why we gather here in worship on this second Sunday of Advent, proclaiming the promised Prince of Peace, singing about peace, praying for peace. We are making room for joy. We are making room for relationships to deepen, grow and expand. We are pushing back the fear. We are being guided in the way of peace one step at a time.

The world has little need for more climate change deniers who ignore the reality of human impact on our earth. The world does have tremendous need for those who deny the inevitability of violence, the dominance of violence, proclaiming the way of peace.

**Malachi 3:1-4**

*The prophets of Israel lived with the expectation that the way things are never have the capacity to determine how things will be. In our first lesson the prophet Micah speaks to people who are discouraged with their circumstances and long for God to act and set things right. To the surprise of many Malachi says preparation for a new day is not limited to fixing what is wrong with everyone else. For the messenger of preparation, change begins with those who seek to live in covenant with God.*

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Luke 1:68-79**

*In our second lesson we hear the Priest Zechariah sing a song of joy to God following the birth of a son to him and his wife Elizabeth. For years Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child. Because of his age, Zechariah had all but given up. Late in life an angel appears and gives Zechariah the good news that they will have a child. Even though he has been praying, Zechariah found it hard to believe. As a result of his unbelief, the angel said you will be mute until the child is born. It is now 9 months later. The one who will become John the Baptist has been born. This is Zechariah's song, which includes not only gratitude for the birth, but an awareness of how God's renewal is at work in the world.*

[Zechariah said:] "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."