

## Pathways to Peace

**Isaiah 9:2-6**      **Luke 1:67-79**

As mentioned last week, these 4 emphases during Advent, these 4 substantial words and themes—hope, peace, joy, and love—are gifts from God. They come to us as gifts of God through Jesus Christ, as we remember Christ’s birth—and his life, death, and resurrection. Today, we reflect on peace. A gift we all need to receive, and then give back to the world. Last Tuesday was “giving Tuesday” and if there was ever a gift to give to our communities and the world today, it’s the gift peace.

### **Isaiah 9:2-6**

- <sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.
- <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.
- <sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- <sup>5</sup> For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire. (nice image of peace there)
- <sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us,

a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This passage contains the song/poem/prophetic words of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, at the birth of his son. This is another miraculous conception and birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who, Luke tells us, were "well along in years" when John was conceived and born.

### **Luke 1:67-79**

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

68 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of  
old,

71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand  
of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our  
enemies,

might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.

78 By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

In speaking about peace, Father Richard Rohr has said, "If we want to *have* peace, we must *become* peace." If we want peace *out there*, we need to cultivate it *in here*. It's both-and: peace in here, peace out there.

I love the themes of dawn breaking and light shining forth in darkness from both of these readings, but I've especially been mulling over that last line from Zechariah's song of praise, that by God's tender mercy he will guide his people's feet into the way of peace, at the coming of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

So, this morning I'd like to reflect on the pathways of peace. Or, pathways *into* peace. Given our covid realities and stay at home necessities, I'm going to focus mainly on inner peace this morning, but it's hard to separate inner peace from outer peace. Because they are interrelated: inner peace will undoubtedly have effect on our actions and efforts as we work to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Richard Rohr says, as we become peace, we achieve peace.

Btw, there are numerous peace-related Scriptures (about inner and outer peace) that I have made available—they will be listed at the end of the sermon notes, and Dayle will post them on the reflections tab on our web site.

As we dive in, I want to say from the start that for those of us who have ties to Seattle, a good and simple starting place for a pathway to inner peace is: don't watch Seahawks games! Just don't watch. Unless your doctor has told you that you don't have enough stress in your life right now. Heidi and I have a new habit of going for walks during the games now. There is enough feedback from peoples' homes in the neighborhood that we can find out how the game is going.

Now, onto the meaningful pathways of peace. There is so much that can be said here, but I'm going to try to keep it simple and give you a couple of things to think about with regard to pathways into peace, and then a prayer practice and a story, to see if something captures your imagination and speaks to your heart.

Here are a couple of thoughts on pathways into peace. More like a couple of words to ponder. They both happen to begin with the letter P, like peace. So, in the spirit of Sesame Street, today's sermon is brought to you by the letter P!

One pathway into peace is by accepting **paradox**. Accept paradox. That is, learn to think, 'both-and.' Even if the both-and's seem contradictory. We are

such 'either-or' thinkers and believers, and it's making us uptight and anxious and I would even say judgmental. Because when something or someone doesn't fit into this or that category, it can make us uptight. It's why our country is so polarized. Because we see everything as a simple binary. Right-wrong. Left-right. They're good-they're bad. Us-them. Binary thinking is creating a tribal society, where people feel like they have to decide what tribe they belong to, and don't belong to. If you want to find a bazillion examples of binary thinking, just get on Facebook for a few minutes. If you can read what's there dispassionately, you'll clearly see binary, either-or thinking (and right-wrong, dumb-smart, liberal-conservative, and all the other labels that are used).

But most of life isn't like that—it isn't simply either-or. It's more nuanced, and, in my opinion, way more interesting. *People* are more interesting than that. We need to become better at both-and. To accept paradox as part of life. Or, not just *part* of life, but life itself.

So I would invite you to experiment with both-and thinking. For example, with regard to the pandemic, we could say, "This is terrible, and many people are struggling economically; *and*, during this time many families are growing closer together, and it's beneficial." This is a tough time, *and*, I'm learning some

things—about myself, or through intentional learning I would not have chosen to do in routine times.

On a more personal level, I think of our daughters who are looking for jobs right now, and struggling to find them. They can say, “I’m competent and smart, *and*, I’m flowing with life’s realities day-to-day in a tough job market.”

I remember a former congregant who was living with (and dying from) cancer, who every day would say his life was amazing and filled with good things. “I’m living with cancer; *and*, it’s a wonderful life.”

Thinking like this helps to calm us down and accept life coming to us on its own terms. And it helps us to see God and faith on their own terms! As I’ve mentioned before, this both-and thinking applies to the gospel. The gospel is not *either* prayer and evangelism and saving souls, *or*, social justice and activism. It’s both. Jesus never separated those things. And, Jesus used paradox a lot in his parables, and in his teachings. For example, in one parable a farmer sows seed in the ground, and Jesus says the seed is the Word of God. In another parable another farmer sows seed and Jesus says the seeds are the children of the Kingdom. So which is it? Are we the seeds, or is the Word of God the seed? Yes! It’s both!

Isaiah used paradox in that creative and delightful image we heard in last Sunday's reading, that the wolf shall live with the lamb, the lion and the goat, and a little child shall lead them. Those animals usually live apart from each other, not together. And little children don't become leaders. It's a both-and image of a peaceful future. We're supposed to imagine this, and live into it. Paradox.

So, I can say to myself, I feel exhausted and overwhelmed sometimes because of *everything, and*, positive changes are happening and we get a glimpse of those day by day. Then I can take a deep breath and step back and know that I'll be okay, you'll be okay, our communities will be okay. Because the God of paradox is with us! The "Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" who has existed from all time and eternity, comes to earth vulnerably and enters into time as a finite human being. There's paradox for you—a both-and mystery! Don't try to figure it out, just appreciate it.

Another pathway to peace is: getting **perspective**. Perspective. That's what accepting paradox will do. Help us to see a bigger picture. And, to see things more clearly. For example, in ambiguous times, in liminal spaces and seasons, as we accept reality for what it is and allow life and faith to come to us on its own terms, perspective helps us to say, "The *situation* is crazy; not a

particular *person*.” The *situation* is crazy; not the person. And ‘the person’ might be me! I’m not crazy; the situation is crazy. Again, as we are able, we try to step back, take a deep breath, and hopefully realize we’ll be okay.

Perspective also helps us realize and accept that we are not in control. There is something much bigger going on, and I can consent to God’s gracious activity in the bigger picture, and the smaller picture too. Like I said last week, we show up and pay attention, cooperate with God, and then release the outcome. Because ultimately, we are not in control. Outcomes belong to God. If Advent and Christmas teach us one lesson, it’s that God can do whatever God wants to do, however God wants to do it—in mercy and grace, always.

If we lose perspective about our life and faith, we lose peace—personal peace. And if we lose perspective about others, we lose *interpersonal* peace. That happens when people see others only as “other.” That’s binary thinking again, and the ‘other’ becomes “one of *those* people”—a potential threat, or a problem. Not-from-our-tribe. Not-like-me.

Perspective helps us see that we’re all in this together. Perspective helps us recognize that the Prince of Peace will bring the dawn from on high; he will shine light into darkness. Because Jesus was born and lived and died as the

“other.” He became “one of *those* people” for the sake of *those* people (which is all of us, actually).

These are a couple of pathways into peace—paradox and perspective. It’s funny, as I was brainstorming about the sermon, other “P” words came to mind: prayer, patience, perseverance (especially in doing good; waging peace as the banner says), playfulness and positivity, and so on. Funny how that happens sometimes.

Let me share one practice we can try, and one story that might encourage us. Both will invite you to use your imagination, and maybe even engage your body a little bit.

Sacred Heart. This has been a beloved Catholic image and symbol for at least 8 centuries (icon on your screen, and in the reflections tab). There are many artistic versions of this symbol, and they all reflect the very heart of Christ, of “God’s boundless and passionate love for humankind” (as it says in the explanation from the Catholic church).

This is a beautiful image, and can stir a person’s devotion, but here is how this can be meaningful, and practical, and lead us into peace. And contribute to peace in our relationships. First, is to know that because Christ dwells in your

heart (as Paul says in Ephesians 3:17, that Christ dwells in our hearts as we are rooted and grounded in love), know that you, too, have a sacred heart. It's true; the sacred heart of Christ, and your heart, are united, spiritually. Lay hold of that truth.

And then take that image and belief into prayer. Many have described prayer as bringing your thinking down into your heart. We so often pray in our heads, but the goal is to move into our hearts in prayer. So try this: next time a disturbing thought, resentment, negativity, or irritation comes into your mind, and you are tempted to play it out in your head or latch onto it, instead move that thought or person into your heart space—literally. Imagine holding that thought, or person in your heart space. There, surround this negativity with quiet (which is much easier to do in the heart) and with your warm pumping blood (the life-flow, which will often feel warm like coals).

In this place, it becomes difficult to comment, judge, create story lines, or remain antagonistic. You are in a place that does not create or feed on contraries or binaries, but is the natural organ of life, and love. Love lives and thrives in the heart space.

This practice can keep us from obsessive, or compulsive head games. It can make the difference between being peaceful, or being perplexed and disturbed. This can be our practice when we pray for someone (whether a friend or an enemy). When we pray for them, we are holding them in our heart space. And after we hold them and pray for them, release them to God.

This can be one of our contributions to “Peace on earth, goodwill to all” that the angels sang about. To learn to see others not just as “other,” but as also held close to the heart of God.

Kathy “Killian” Noe. Founder of Recovery Café in Seattle. She tells a story of a time when on a warm sunny summer day, she and her husband and a group of friends were floating down a lazy river and enjoying a relaxing day. As they were nearing the end of their river float, they ran over a rock in the water and their raft was overturned and floated out of their reach. They knew, as the day began, that there were dangerous and deadly rapids downriver, which under normal circumstances they would have avoided by paddling their raft ashore. That was the plan as they set out, to exit the river before the rapids.

But there they were, each of them, down the river without a paddle. Literally. But not to worry, someone on the riverbank saw what happened and

told them that a few folks had driven down to a bridge and were lowering ropes for them to grab onto and pull them to shore. A wall of ropes!

Killian freaked out, though, and tried to swim against the current, mostly tried to put her feet down, only to have the current sweep her feet out from under her, or pull her under.

Then, in one moment while flailing in the water, she turned and saw her husband, floating happily on his back in the middle of the river like he didn't have a care in the world. And it occurred to her that he had gotten the message that there would be a rope for him to grab onto eventually, so he may as well enjoy the ride until he got there. Anxiously flailing and trying to save herself wasn't helping her. Here is another example of paradox: if I try too hard, it can often make things worse (esp. if I try to do it by myself). But if I relax into a situation, I'll receive the help I need (esp. from others).

Peace is knowing that I don't *have to* freak out. I don't *have to* freak out—not always required! Help will come. Or, I will get to help, in time. So, I can 'go with the flow' of life and let it come to me on its own terms—even when life's raft gets overturned. Because help will be there. And btw, any and every passage of Scripture we read during Advent says that, in its own way: yes, there is darkness

and difficulty, *and* yes, it's also true that God brings light and life when it's needed, at the right time.

Now, you'll want continue watching and listening as we sing and listen to an amazing arrangement of It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, a Christmas carol focused on the message of the angels, 'Peace on earth, goodwill to all.' The carol was written by Edmund Sears just before the start of the Civil War. I would invite you to pay careful attention to the lyrics. See if "the weary world" he speaks of from that time doesn't sound somewhat like ours right now. See if verse 3 doesn't speak to you personally (and the arrangement they wrote for verse three is moving.

2Thessalonians 3:16: "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you."

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## Peace Scriptures:

### God Gives Us Peace

*Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything... and the peace of God, which passes understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philipians 4:6-7*

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 14:27*

*Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. Isaiah 26:3*

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1*

*For the Kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Romans 14:17*

*To us a child is born... and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6*

*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. Luke 1:79*

*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has... broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us... He proclaimed peace to those who were far off, and peace to those who were near. Ephesians 2:14, 17*

### God Calls Us to Peace

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Matthew 5:9*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12:17-18*

*Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14*

*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1, 3*

*Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

Psalm 34:14

*Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification.* Romans 14:19

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.* Colossians 3:15

*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits... And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.* James 3:16-18