

## Pathways Into Peace

**Isaiah 9:2-6      Luke 1:67-79**

The 4 traditional 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 the coming of Christ to earth.

Today, we reflect on peace. A gift we all need to receive, and then give back to the world, in our homes and our communities.

The gospel passage from Luke contains the song/poem/prophetic words of Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, at the birth of his son. Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel, who told him he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child in their old age, and Zechariah didn't believe it. So the angel Gabriel struck him dumb, unable to speak, for the entire duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Imagine that! Especially for a priest, whose work is mainly with words. Then, John is born and Zechariah's voice returns and here is what he says, or sings.

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

<sup>68</sup> `Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

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

<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of  
old,

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

<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> 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.  
<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
<sup>78</sup> 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, many of our wise spiritual guides over the centuries have said, "If we want to *have* peace, we must *become* peace." If we want peace *out there*, we must cultivate it *in here* (in our hearts and lives). 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 ways, or pathways *into* peace. 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 and become peacemakers. To paraphrase our spiritual wise ones, when we become peace, we achieve peace.

There is so much that can be said here, but I'm going to try to keep it simple and give us a couple of things to ponder with regard to pathways to peace, and then share 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 message is brought to you by the letter P!

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

Many, if not most people are "either-or" thinkers and believers, and it's making us uptight and anxious and, at time, even say judgmental. 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 endless examples of binary thinking, just get on Facebook for a few minutes. If you can read what's there dispassionately, you'll see examples of binary, either-or thinking (and right-wrong, dumb-smart, liberal-conservative, and all the other labels that are used).

Most of life isn't simply either-or. Most situations and challenges aren't just either-or. It's all more nuanced, and more interesting. *People* are more interesting than that. We need to become better at both-and. To accept paradox as part of life.

Neils Bohr, Nobel Prize winning physicist, had a wonderful way of saying it: "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth." Something that seems contradictory or absurd may in reality express a truth. (Physicists have to think this way because light, for example is both waves and particles at the same time; and certain particles can appear and disappear and reappear somewhere else without passing through space; so they exist and don't exist at the same time... Paradox!).

I would invite us to experiment with both-and thinking. For example, with regard to the turmoil and changes in the world and in our society, we could say, “This is difficult, and sometimes painful; **and**, during this time positive changes are being made which are beneficial.” This is a tough time, **and**, we’re learning some things.

I think of those who are looking for jobs right now, and struggling to find them. They can say, “I am competent and smart and I have gifts to offer the world, **and**, I’m flowing with life’s realities day-to-day in a changing and challenging job market.”

I remember a former congregant who was living with terminal cancer, who every day would say his life was filled with good things. He would say, “I’m living with cancer; **and**, it’s a wonderful life, filled with gifts.”

Thinking like this can help us 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 said before, this both-and thinking applies to the gospel. The gospel is not *either* outreach/evangelism and saving souls, *or*, social justice and political activism. Jesus never separated those things; they’re all part of the one gospel package.

Along that line, interestingly enough, I have received some emails in just the last two weeks from persons or organizations out in the community who are in one way or other trying to figure out if we're a liberal or conservative church, by asking what we think about specific issues. As if where we land on specific issues determines whether or not we're a Bible-believing true gospel church, or if we're living up to the standards of a social gospel. To my observation, again, Jesus' ministry didn't separate those things, and his ministry and teaching was more nuanced and paradoxical than that.

Jesus used paradox in his parables and teachings, in which there are apparently contradictory elements. 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? The answer is: Yes! It's both!

Isaiah used contradictory images in that creative and delightful passage we hear at this time of year: that the wolf shall live with the lamb, the lion with the goat, bears and cattle will be buddies, and a little child shall lead them. We know that those animals usually live safely apart from each other, not together. And

little children don't become leaders of wild beasts. It's a both-and image of a peaceful future. We're supposed to imagine this, and live into it. That's paradox.

So, we can say to ourselves, I feel exhausted and overwhelmed sometimes because of *everything, and*, I get glimpses of the good things happening everyday when I choose to look for them (which is next week's theme: choosing joy). And when I make that choice, and accept paradox, I can then take a deep breath and step back and know that I'll be okay, you'll be okay, our communities will be okay. And we can become peacemakers in the world—we can become peace—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 human being, to be with us, as one of us. Now there's paradox for us, the fullness of God dwelling in a human body, as the Apostle Paul puts it in Colossians—a both-and mystery! We're not told to try to figure it out, but to appreciate it. And accept the paradox for what it is.

Another pathway into peace, or perhaps a parallel pathway to peace, is: getting **perspective**. Getting perspective. We can get perspective when we pause, step back, and try to see a bigger picture. Pause, step back, and try to see a bigger picture. This is prayer! Prayer isn't just closing our eyes, folding our

hands, and bowing our heads. Prayer is also looking up and out, with eyes wide open and hearts calm and open. “I lift my eyes to the hills” it says in Psalm 121. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” That’s perspective! Because we see how big our Creator is. And we are reminded that our creator watches over us, and the world, 24-7.

Perspective, then, 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! Which helps me to release outcomes. Because, ultimately, we are not in control. Outcomes belong to God. If Advent and Christmas teach us one lesson, as we read the stories, it’s that God can do whatever God wants to do, however God wants to do it—in mercy and grace, of course, always.

If we lose perspective about ourselves, our life and faith, and try to grasp for control and specific outcomes, we lose *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. And it becomes easy to dehumanize others.

Perspective helps us see that we're all human beings on this earth together, and that *we actually need each other*. Perspective helps us recognize that the Prince of Peace will bring the dawn from on high, as Zechariah beautifully put it. The Prince of Peace 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 all *those people* (which is all of us, actually).

These are a couple of pathways into peace—paradox and perspective. Which can help guide our feet into positive action steps that lead to peace.

Here is a simple practice we can try, which will help with accepting paradox and getting perspective, and then I'll share a fun story that I hope might encourage us. Both will invite you to use your imagination, and even engage your body a little bit. I like embodied practices like walking prayers and reflection, breathing prayers, visual and imaginative prayers. I realize this isn't for everyone, so bear with me if this isn't your thing. However, it might be your thing and you just don't know it yet! Because you haven't tried it.

This practice is called the prayer of the heart. This practice has been around for centuries. Here is how this can be meaningful, and practical, and lead us into peace. And contribute to peace in our daily interactions. 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 have a sacred heart. It's true; the sacred heart of Christ, and your heart, are united, spiritually. That's a true statement, not an opinion! Lay hold of that truth.

And then take that truth, that belief into prayer. Many have described prayer as bringing your thinking down into your heart, where Christ is and where your true self is. 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, 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 situation or person into your heart space—literally. One way to embody this is to take your hands and place them on or near your head, and then place the thoughts in your hands and then move them down to your heart, placing your hands over your heart. Take that thought, situation, or person and bring them to your heart space. Imagine holding that thought, situation, or person there. Then, surround any negativity with quiet (which is much easier to do in the heart) and surround it with your warm pumping blood, the life-flow.

You'll notice, in this place, that it becomes difficult to comment, judge, create story lines, or overthink things. We 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.

After a time of holding a thought or situation there, say a prayer of blessing, and release it all 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 persons and situations as held close to the heart of God. Now, a good story...

Told by Kathy "Killian" Noe. Founder of Recovery Café in Seattle (worth looking up and learning about!). 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 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.

Killian freaked out, though, and tried to swim against the current, but 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 challenging 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! And, not always helpful! Peace is knowing that 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.

We’re going to now sing *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, a Christmas carol focused on the message of the angels, ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to all.’ As I like to remind us every year, the carol was written by a man named Edmund Sears just before the start of the Civil War. Everyone knew that war was about to break out, and the carol invites us to accept paradox, but it especially invites us to gain perspective by pausing, stepping back, and looking up and out to listen to the message of peace that the angels proclaimed. 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.