

“Peace Requires Reconciliation” based on Luke 3:3-14 and Malachi 3:1-6

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on December 8, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Every year in Advent, we have four themes – hope in week 1, peace in week 2, joy in week 3, and love in week 4. Likewise, every year in Advent, the suggested readings for weeks two and three, are all about Jesus’s cousin, the man we know as John the Baptist.

He is the voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” This phrase in English, on its own, just sounds downright lovely. It’s the theme of a Christmas decorating party. It’s great. It’s why we have the Hanging of the Green service. Except, as fun and important as this preparation is, John and the Hebrew prophets have a lot more in mind, more to say, and it’s inflammatory.

At first blush, perhaps, this makes the theme of peace for this week a bit of a challenge. After all, a camel skin wearing, locust eating, beehive raiding, man of the wilderness, who calls the people who come to hear him preach “children of snakes,” or as the King James put it, a “brood of vipers,” hardly seems peaceful. He’s yelling about prepare the way – so they come to listen – and he starts throwing insults and making accusations. This hardly seems like a recipe for peace.

For most of us, when we think about peace, we think about it in two ways: First, there’s conflict avoidance – as in, “I just want to keep the peace this Thanksgiving.” We are thankful when the “John the Baptists” of our life keep their mouth shut at the dinner table. That way everyone is able to eat pumpkin pie and talk about the weather.

Second, we tend to see peace as the absence of war. Throughout human civilization, war or armed conflict has been constant or at least, it’s been a constant threat. Peacetime then is when we can live normal lives, free of threats. This is why world peace in every nation seems far-fetched.

Now, both of these are often good things – avoiding conflict and the absence of war. I am thankful that I am here and not living in Ukraine or in the Gaza strip, because I cannot imagine trying to go about life amid armed soldiers and bombs, death and destruction. Likewise, the Thanksgiving table “John the Baptist” is likely not a prophet, and more likely is confusing trolling with prophecy. Now, trolling is when we systematically search for a flaws in another person to call them out, or we bait someone with a provocative statement, trying to draw out some emotional response. I am perfectly glad to avoid this kind of conflict.

Yet, for the actual John the Baptist to whom people are coming to be baptized in the Jordan, the absence of war in his world only exists because of brutal military violence by Roman troops, who instill fear in people. Their best tool is the cross, meant for anyone who would oppose their way. The avoidance of conflict then is not about silencing the trolling voices but keeping quiet about injustice and the suffering of the people. This is done in order to stay off the radar of Roman troops, maintain power and protect self-interest. Beloved, this is not peace – so maybe the wild man has more to teach us about peace than we think.

The truth is that peace, in a biblical sense, may include absence of war and avoiding conflict, but these are side effects of wholeness, of restoration, of health, and rightness with God. We often translate the Hebrew “shalom” as peace, and that is a valid translation, but peace is not enough.

The word means complete or whole, with things as they should be. This is the straight path of the Lord, the level ground for God to reach us. So, then the valleys need to be filled, and you may need

a shovel. Mountains need to be made low, a pickaxe or explosives. The bent needs to be straightened and this requires heat and force, particularly with metal. For rough places to be made smooth, it requires sandpaper and lots of friction.

The words of the prophet Isaiah, Malachi, and the work of John the Baptist here are not simply about individuals preparing their own path to reach God regardless of others. No, this is about us preparing us so that we can prepare the path for God to reach all people – all flesh will know the salvation of our God. Peace starts with justice, and it requires truth and reconciliation.

In 1996, just two years after the election of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid, South Africa began the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to heal the nation. This commission was grounded on a biblical notion of restorative justice. The aim was not vengeance and punishment of former leaders, but to bring out the shovels, pickaxes, bending tools and sandpaper, to lift up the valleys, bring down the mountains, straighten what is bent and smooth out the rough. They did this by telling the truth through the stories of the people involved, both the victims of apartheid, and from the perpetrators.

It was a turbulent time leading up to this. From 1990 to 1994 alone, political violence killed 14,000 people, injuring 22,000 more. The new government had been created, but they were a far cry from peace. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was officially created to address this. They opted to give witness, and hear testimony of human rights violations, recording the stories of both the victims and the perpetrators. This gave the space for confession, which means to tell the truth. This truth telling and it brought up a lot of deep seeded pain. It called out a lot of people for their sins on both sides of the conflict and it addressed it, directly.

Some walked away from the process upset by the amnesty that was granted to some, and others walked away from the process upset by the reparations given to others. There are still those in South Africa who want to go back to apartheid, and there are still those in South Africa who want payback. But on the whole, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a path for healing, pouring out a painful antiseptic of truth, that restored, healed, and made many whole.

This is what Malachi is talking about when we read, “Who can endure the day of his coming?” Whether this refers to the coming of the Lord or the coming of the messenger, it is the same sentiment here. “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” Telling the truth is difficult, hearing the truth might be even more difficult, but it is necessary.

Truth is the refiner’s fire and the launderer’s soap! In Hebrew, the word repentance is to turn away from a sin, and in Greek, it means to have your mind changed. The refiner’s fire softens and melts, it consumes the imperfections, and once the metal cools again, it is harder, and it is pure.

The sins listed in Malachi and by John the Baptist are all sins against other people. They are all sins that require the truth to be told and reparations to be made. This requires forgiveness to be given, in order to have reconciliation and true peace. This is not about judgement, condemnation, and punishment, but about God’s judgement, redemption, and forgiveness. This comes even if it means being refined in fire, or for those who have committed these sins to be stretched and agitated in water with soap, beaten on the rocks and hung to dry. While telling the truth is difficult, being a cloth that is laundered or a metal that is refined means you have been made better, and saved, nonetheless.

The first admonition is to those practicing sorcery – and this is what I love most in Hebrew. Here’s my side tangent – many of the words we translate as nouns, like in your bible, sorcerer, adulterer, and liar, are actually participles. I love that these are active verbs that end “ing.” The best translation then may be “those practicing sorcery” or “those committing adultery.” There is a distinction in the Judeo-Christian world view, that we are not defined by our actions, but asked to change. It’s not about near permanent titles of shame or honor, but about acknowledging guilt, without excuses, and giving room for forgiveness by God and we hope by others as well.

So, now let’s get off my sidetrack and get back to sorcery. This is not about you being Jafar or Sauron here. This is about the manipulation of other people, that can be done through drugs, potions, tricks, or any other means by which you take control of another person’s actions. Yes it can be as malicious as drugging a person, or it can be holding on to our own lie so much that another person questions themselves, something called gaslighting.

It can be hard to tell the truth about the sorcery in our lives. We even open ourselves up to be victims of it by putting stock in horoscopes, Ouija boards and crap like that. I’m sorry it is crap and if I offended you in saying that, well it is the truth. When we try to manipulate other people we practice sorcery and so it requires us to hear the truth, to tell the truth and accept the truth, to mend the damage done, so that we can stop and move on.

Next on the list is adultery. This is about unfaithfulness in large and small ways. The large way of course is when a spouse breaks the bond of marriage. This is brutal and it happens too often. People make excuses for it, but it causes lasting damage that can only be undone or healed by true confession and repentance.

That’s why adultery is the metaphor most often used for sin itself. Sin is our unfaithfulness to God. When Paul says we cannot justify ourselves, he means we cannot make excuses for our sins. We cannot just say, “I’m just living my own truth,” or “things just changed,” or “I had to do it for me.” We cannot do this with adultery or any other sins because those excuses can be even applied to murder. Keeping commitments to God and one another, large and small, should be taken very seriously.

Paul’s point which fits with John and Malachi is that God doesn’t forgive us because of us. We do not earn forgiveness with the right excuse, or have some credit bank of good deeds that let us get away with things we will do in the future. No, forgiveness is freely given by God when we tell the truth, trusting in Jesus instead of our excuses.

This is the same standard for swearing falsely – when we lie or claim divine support for something untrue. Truth in Hebrew is about something firmly set in place, a support, or foundation. Though the word existed before the Hebrew Alphabet was finalized, you may find online a cute thing I love which says the word, “Emet,” is the first, middle, and last letter in the alphabet, which is given as proof that truth contains all things. It may not be why the word is what it is, but it is fitting to help us remember that peace is about wholeness and there can be no peace without truth. Indeed, there can be no truth without being called to account for when we swear falsely to God or one another.

The final admonitions, foretold by Malachi and expressed in the gospels from John, address the social relationships between those who have, and those who have not. Malachi warns against oppressing or exploiting both hired workers, and the widows and orphans, or those without

support, the poorest. Malachi speaks to those in a position to exploit – namely the priests. But John, the messenger, extends this to all of us, saying that anyone who has extra – extra clothes or food – should share with those who have none.

Even the lowliest among us in this room probably has more than we need. How often honestly, do we share? I appreciate in this church the generosity that you show and this reveals our effort. This is not meant to make us feel guilty, but only a reminder that the ultimate standard is difficult, but our only justification comes through Christ.

Malachi then says not to push away the foreigner, or stranger. The word here literally means to stretch them. This is a warning against asking too much of outsiders to be included in our lives. As I said, Malachi speaks directly to priests, but again since John is the messenger he foretells says it, we should take this to heart as well. What barriers do we put up before we will include someone?

How many of us feel uncomfortable by some of what I've said? I do because I'm preaching to myself here too. The truth is that the church needs repentance, all of us need mind changing and turning around. So if we look at this exclusion concept, we certainly have no grounds to exclude anyone else. We all need to be counted among the ranks of sinners to hear about God's love and be transformed by God's love. None of us is perfect as we are.

This is the point of this Christmas season as we look forward to the coming prince of peace. Jesus is the very image of reconciliation, of the perfect God loving humanity so much, that he entered into our humanity, lived in our flesh, and entered our limits. The perfect God didn't just stand far away in judgement, but took on the judgement of all sin and death itself. Jesus died on the cross for us, rose again for us, and ascended for us. God did not do this because God needed it. God did not do this for God's sake but did this for our sake.

No, this is about God coming down to us in Jesus, being humbled to reconcile with us, to be the way. We are told to prepare the way, well he is the way. Tell the truth, no he is the truth. He came to be the life, well he is our life, so that we can be made new, as temples of God's Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are empowered by the Spirit to love others in the same way that God loves us.

That's why the last two suggestions from John were so difficult for the people there. The tax collectors and the Roman guards all had power and authority. To tell them that they needed to relinquish that power, to be humble themselves, challenged their very identity. The truth hurts sometimes, but it needs to be said by those who have been hurt and it needs to be heard by those who have done the hurting.

Tax collectors earned their living by charging more than required, and John tells them not to do that. The soldiers depended on backing the collectors up, but John says to be content with your wages. John does not exclude them, but he tells the truth.

Beloved, the truth is that all of us are sinners, and yet each of us is known and loved by God. God will not forsake you for what you've done, but true peace, beyond avoiding conflict and beyond the absence of war, is the wholeness that comes in telling the truth, listening to the truth, and accepting the truth about our own sin. This includes the truth about its impact on those around us.

Our calling is to bear good fruit in this world through our deeds of love with an eye toward reconciliation. Peace requires reconciliation with God and with one another, and to that end, in this

Advent season we wait for peace, knowing it is not yet fully here. We give thanks for the love of God, revealed in Jesus, who was born for us, died for us, and rose for us.

Do not be afraid to hear the truth that we are all sinners, but instead, know that in telling the truth about our sin, we find reconciliation. In doing so we make peace with God, and with one another. It is difficult to hear challenges, but the peace that comes through wholeness requires truth and reconciliation. Take comfort in the words at the end of our reading from Malachi, "Because I am the Lord, I do not change, and you, children of Jacob, are not finished (destroyed or brought to an end)." We have hope in Christ in whom we know peace and the love of God. Amen.

Meditation on Isaiah 55:10-13 from Hanging of the Green Service on December 4, 2024

As you may know, I love the Frozen movie franchise. The first movie was very good turning some movie tropes on their head. The second movie is, in my view, was excellent. But beyond the two main movies, Disney has made a series of shorts, including Olaf doing a synopsis of different Disney movies, but of course there is "Olaf's Frozen Adventure," which is set between the two films.

The main character Elsa and her magical powers over snow and ice are out in the open. The people of Arendale now know and trust that she can control her powers, and so, she and her sister Anna want to get involved with holiday traditions. They invite the whole town to a feast, but everyone goes home. They all want to get started on their holiday traditions. The two young women then realize that they have lived apart, in fear and hiding, for so long, they have no traditions.

So, Olaf goes out and decides he is going help his friends and gather the traditions of their kingdom, and bring them all back to Elsa and Anna so that they will have everyone else's traditions. But as we learn, traditions are not things that you can automatically import. No, traditions are born of the shared traditions we have with others. Traditions start as something we do once, and only become traditions when we repeat them. What's more, traditions evolve too, as nothing is the same two years in a row. Things are added, taken away, But there is a core theme always.

In Olaf's Frozen Adventure, he sings a song about Christmas, only saying Christmas once, but we all know it's about Christmas when he says "That Time of Year." In the vaguely post reformation to early modern setting of Norway, clearly means Christmas, even if Disney doesn't want to limit itself. And so, Olaf, as an outsider – he's a newly born snowman – brings a cute perspective to all the different traditions.

"Happy, merry, holly, jolly season's greetings here, I'm wondering what your family does at that time of year, Love and joy and peace on Earth and tidings of good cheer, Do you have tradition things for that time of year?"

My favorite part is a brief spoken interlude by Olaf as a family shows off its Christmas tree. He says, "You cut down a tree and then you dress its corpse with candles," then pauses as the family hears how crazy this sounds, and then says, "I love it!" After all, this is what we do – we cut down evergreen branches, and then dress them up, and dress up our homes and church, with these now dead symbols of eternal life. And like Olaf, "I LOVE IT!"

This tradition dates back to Lutherans in Germany who made it popular in the 1700s. Contrary to what you might see on the internet, no are no known records of history that show any previous pagan practice like this. It didn't start in Scandinavia nor the Saturnalia of ancient Rome. It all started with German Lutherans. Only German Lutherans risked burning their houses down.

The evergreen is an important metaphor in the writings of the book of Isaiah, particularly in the second section of the book, consisting of chapters 40 to 55. These chapters foretell a coming exodus or leaving from exile for the Jewish people. Our reading tonight comes from the final verses of this section. This is God's promise to the people in exile: You will go out with joy and be led out with peace. Mountains and hills will break out in song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands.

God is declaring that all of creation will celebrate with God's people. The trustworthiness of this statement is in the pattern of God and God's word. Just as rain makes plants grow to produce seeds and food, so it will be with God's word, which goes out and makes things happen. God's word – all that comes from the mouth of God – will be made to prosper, because that is why God said it.

Beloved, the image of the Evergreen is important for us, as we walk in this season. Just like the Winter season, things in life can seem bleak, as if we are barren, in the cold, and suffering. But there is always a place where we can see God at work around us. Isaiah's words speak first to the return of Judah from exile in Babylon, when Cyrus, the emperor, allowed the Jewish people to go home, and even helped them to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.

Second, these words speak to the person and work of Jesus, whom the early church saw as the suffering servant, whom Isaiah writes about just a few chapters earlier as the embodiment of Israel, and also the embodiment of God, the holy arm of God, or God's power. For even after the people returned to Judah, they were in exile, occupied by Persians, by Greeks, and by Romans. There was always a sense then that God was not back in the temple with them.

Third, these words speak to us today, who believe that this suffering servant, was the embodiment of God in our flesh, who died for us, and was raised for us, as the word made flesh, which by the cross accomplished God's desire, which is the reconciliation of people from every nation with God.

Jesus is for us our own personal exodus from exile of sin and death, who leads us with peace and sends us with joy, knowing that he is our salvation. Yet, we live in the now and not yet of this reality. Yes, the Kingdom of God is here now. It is. Jesus was enthroned on the cross and through him, we are made part of his kingdom. But at the same time, we await the fullness of the Kingdom to come.

Isaiah's words then are meant as an assurance, as a comfort to us. We are being sent out with joy, trusting in Jesus, and we are being led out with peace, by faith in Jesus. There are still thorns in this world, just as we see in the winter around us barren trees. There are still briars and pricker bushes, that cause us pain and make us worry. We still have anxiety about loss, the fear that traps us through sin and death. But the evergreen is a memorial, it is a name for God, a sign for us to see that we have lost, or will lose, even our lives, will be brought back to us in the love of God.

Even Olaf's story points to this, as he tries to bring traditions, the trappings of the season to life, but he is left worn out and weary when Elsa and Anna find him, and tell him that he is their tradition – in all the challenges they faced – was that every Christmas they shared their love for one another through the lovable snowman who was now their living friend.

This is the hope we have in God's promise of eternal life – for our love in everything we do to express God's love and all the good things will have new life. Our hope is not in a disembodied consciousness simply existing forever, but it is God's promise to restore all things, raising us to new and everlasting life, because it is God's love that transforms the thorns and briars of life, into the evergreen cypress and the fresh fragrant evergreen myrtle.

When we look upon these trees, let us remember that they are a symbol of God's everlasting love, a memorial and a visual cue to God's name, as a sign of God's love for us now and forever. Amen.