

2006 Advent Sermon Series: Peace on Earth

“A Just Peace”

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 3:7-18

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms UMC on December 17, 2007

The story is told of two elderly Jewish gentlemen who were visiting New York in the 1940's. It was getting late and they needed to find a room for the night. As they passed one hotel, one man says to the other, "Why don't we try this one?" The other says, "Are you crazy? It says on the sign that this is a restricted hotel. You know what that means? It means they don't let Jews in!" To which the first man replies, "Restricted, reschmicted. Let's go in. Just let me do all the talking." So the two men enter and approach the desk clerk.

The man went to the clerk and spoke with a strong Yiddish accent: "We want a room!"

"I'm sorry," said the clerk, "but this is a RESTRICTED hotel. We do NOT allow Jewish people to stay here.

"What makes you think I'm Jewish? I'm just as Christian as you are! Come on, ask me a Christian question!"

"OK. OK. Where was Jesus born?"

"Such a question! Everybody knows that Jesus was born in a stable. Come on, ask me another Christian question!"

"Look," the clerk said impatiently, "I know you are Jewish and you are not staying here!"

"Come on, ask me a question. Ask me, 'What for was Jesus born in a stable!'"

The clerk was now visibly angry. "All right! Why was Jesus born in a stable?!"

"Because a schmuck like you wouldn't give his mother a room either!"

The third Sunday of Advent is about Joy and Justice. It is about Rejoicing and Repenting. And this is all part of the promise of Peace on Earth, the song that the Angels sang to celebrate the birth of a child.

Advent is about preparing for the birth of a child, a birth that brings us joy. But the birth also brings repentance, because the coming of a child means changing the way we live our lives. The changed lives to which we are called are just lives - just lives that bring about peace. And what more could we hope for our children, but that the world we offer to them would be a world of peace and justice, so that they might experience the fullness of joy that comes with God's gift of life.

The third Sunday of Advent is about Joy and Justice. It is about Rejoicing and Repenting. It is about peace on earth. It is about the birth of a child.

Twenty-eight years ago this week our first child was born. Benjamin arrived four weeks early. Born on December 19, he stayed in the hospital 6 days and we brought him home on Christmas Day in 1978. We had been living in Goleta for 6 months. I was the pastor of University Church in Isla Vista, next to the UC Santa Barbara campus. I don't have copies of the sermons I preached back then, but I distinctly remember that Advent

really made sense to me that year. It was all about waiting for the birth of a child. It was about rejoicing. It was also about repenting.

James Liggett says, "Remember the second thing everybody (or at least everybody who has been a parent...) says when they learn that you are expecting a child? The first thing said is always, 'congratulations, we're happy for you; it's wonderful news.' The second thing is always one form or another of, 'boy are you in for it!'"

We are told often, and in a variety of ways, that things are going to change, that everything will be different. Nobody uses the word, but everybody tells us we have to repent, indeed that we are going to repent, to change our way of ... living."

[from a sermon by The Rev. James Liggett of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Big Spring, Texas]

The first scripture we heard this morning was from the prophet Zephaniah:

"Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" (Zephaniah 3:14)

And the second word for the day comes from John the Baptist. To the crowds that came out to be baptized he said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." [Luke 3:7-8]

And then, after John makes a number of other comments of a similar tone, Luke summarizes by saying, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." [Luke 3:18]

Is Luke justified in referring to this as a "good news" sermon?

Yes he is. John's message is good news and reason for rejoicing. And all of this is part of the peace that is the promise of Christmas.

The people in the crowd hear this as good news because John is offering them the opportunity to move from a viper, alienated, adversary life to a renewed, just, right-with-God life. They are moved by John's preaching. "What should we do?" they want to know.

John the Baptist is very specific in describing justice.

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

The word "coat" here is an inexact translation, as we noted last week in the passage about one who was sued for his coat and then gave the plaintiff his shirt as well. The Greek word here is the same word that is translated as "shirt" in that passage. It refers to an undergarment worn next to the body. A poor person would own only two such garments, one for everyday and one for the Sabbath. John is talking to the common people in the crowd, people's whose closets were almost bare. To those who have what is conventionally considered the bare minimum he gives instructions to share what they have with the completely destitute.

Gary Waddingham was serving as a pastor in rural Montana several years ago. His church was distributing Christmas baskets, and they got more donations than they had places to take them. He thought of a poor family who had not been on the list. They lived out on the edge of town. He drove to their house with food in tow. As he drove he tried to think of what he would say. How do you offer charity while preserving the dignity of those who receive charity? He said to the woman (amidst several children), "do you know anyone who could use some extra food" thinking this was a good lead-in to offering it to her. "You bet," she said and immediately went to get her coat, headed toward her car, and said, "follow me." She took him to people poorer than herself who needed the food. What

pastor Waddingham remembers most clearly is that there was absolutely no hesitation on her part.

I think there were a lot of folks who received with joy John's words about justice. Yes, that is the way to live. That is God's intention for our lives.

There are some in the crowd that own more than two shirts. Some of the people in the crowd are tax collectors. They ask John what they should do. What would it mean for them to bear fruits that befit repentance?

"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," he tells them.

Some in the crowd are Soldiers. They too are touched by John's preaching and they ask him, "What should we do?"

To the soldiers he says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats."

It seems to us that these instructions are self-evident. Couldn't the tax collectors and the soldiers figure it out for themselves? But these practices were probably so common that they were taken for granted. Tax collectors paid in advance for the right to collect tolls, and then commonly collected as much as they could. They no doubt thought of themselves as business people trying to maximize their profits. Soldiers weren't going to get rich on their basic salary, but using their intimidating power, no doubt with the consent and cooperation of other soldiers, expropriating property from the occupied civilian population was a perk of the profession. "Be satisfied with your wages," John tells them.

The word "we" should not be overlooked in their question. Tax collectors ask, "What should we do?" Soldiers ask, "What should we do?" These were not rogue individuals, bad apples spoiling the barrel. They were participants in a system of corruption and John addresses them collectively: "You, all of you, stop participating in this corrupt but commonly accepted system."

And so we might ask John, "What should we do?" What should we pastors do? What should we politicians do? What should we school teachers or merchants or hotel owners or lawyers or hospital administrators or insurance executives or labor leaders or media moguls or ___ (you fill in the blank) do? If John the Baptist came and observed our world today, he would probably have a specific answer for each of us. Where do we participate in injustice that just happens because that is the way it is commonly done?

What should we do? There are Methodists living on both sides of our border with Mexico. They have been cooperating for years on work projects and seminary scholarships for pastors. Recently they started talking to each other about immigration issues. What should we do? What can we do? When they talked, one discovery was that Methodist Churches in Mexico are constantly called upon to help migrants and deportees who find themselves on the Mexican side of the border with no resources. More conversation ensued, and some folks have decided how they are going to begin to do something. They are sharing resources with the Mexican churches in order to share the burden of food and shelter. United Methodists in California are putting together "Hope Packs" that the churches in Mexico can give to migrants or deportees who decide that they want to go back to their villages in the interior of Mexico. A "Hope Pack" is a backpack with toiletries, a change of clothes, water, some non-perishable food and a bus ticket. And they are working on the next phase of this project, which is a cooperative effort between the Methodist Church of Mexico and United Methodist agencies in this country to help with job training or small business loans when they get back to their hometowns in Mexico.

When we sit down to talk with each other as neighbors, across borders or across the street, sometimes it becomes self-evident what we should do. Residents of the Sunkist Park neighborhood of Culver City are talking to the people who own businesses adjacent to them on Sepulveda Blvd. and finding out how they will be affected by ambitious redevelopment proposals. What will be just? What should we do?

We are talking about peace this Advent season. "Peace on earth" is the promise of the angels' song on the night of Jesus birth.

We have said that this peace we are promised at Christmas time is an all-encompassing peace. It is *Personal Peace*, the peace that passes understanding that comes to us because of who Jesus is, God's love come to be with us. It is *The Way of Peace*, the way Jesus lived, the way that Jesus taught us to live, the way of the cross, the way that the lifestyle that Jesus modeled for us and taught us in the Sermon on the Mount; the way that responds to injustice and threat neither by fighting violence with violence, nor by running away, but the creative third way of non-violent resistance.

Today we emphasize that this is a *Just Peace*. Justice is what happens on the way as from Personal Peace to *Universal Peace*, which is the final fulfillment of the promise of the angels' song: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to the people of the earth."

The birth of a child has changed our lives.

Repent, turn around, change, and then rejoice at all the change you see. Do justice and know joy. Amen.