

The Price of Peace

Just in case you thought the title of this morning's sermon was a typo, it's not. It's natural on the second Sunday of Advent to expect to hear about the Prince of Peace, one of the traditional titles of Jesus and one often referenced at this time of year in connection with that beautiful passage in Isaiah 9:6 that Handel used to such wonderful effect in "Messiah": "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." OK, all of you who immediately had the music running through your head, raise your hands. It's likely to happen again this morning if it hasn't already. Both of the scriptures I read just moments ago also figure prominently in "Messiah."

But while the ultimate focus of all of our worship in this place is The Prince of Peace, what I want to talk about this morning is the price of peace. Peace comes at a price in this world. It comes at a political and physical price for many adherents of peace and, for all of us who follow The Prince of Peace, peace comes at a spiritual price. The political price of political peace is addressed in an article entitled "The Impertinence of Peace" by Richard Wilson, professor of theology at Mercer University. Wilson wrote, "To speak in favor of peace always is to find a dissenting voice. There are in our generation peace protests and war rallies. World-wide more encourage war than protest for peace. Things have not changed much. Even casual observers of history--all of human history--will note that peace protestors always stand in a minority against those who rally the majority for war." As to the spiritual price for spiritual peace, Kym reminded us all as she lit our candle of peace this morning that to experience peace, we must trust Jesus and we must prepare our hearts for peace. We must prepare because we are not, much as we might like to be, very good at experiencing and spreading the peace of God, the kind of shalom that I mentioned to the children earlier this morning. In discussing the lack of peace and other social ills that were prevalent some years ago (and are still prevalent today), Billy Graham said, "Our basic problem is not a race problem. Our basic problem is not a poverty problem. Our basic problem is not a war problem. Our basic problem is a heart problem. We need to get the heart changed, the heart transformed."

That is certainly the message of both of our prophets this morning, Malachi and John. The word that both of them had from God was that God's people needed to change their hearts. In Malachi's case, the word was specifically to the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. We don't know much about Malachi – that may not have even been his name but a sort of *nom de plume* because in Hebrew, Malachi means "My Messenger." We do know that his message probably comes from the Fifth Century before Christ, one of the latest Hebrew prophets to be recorded in the Bible. Malachi speaks to a people who have been permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple by Cyrus of Persia. There is no King, of course, and so the priests of the Temple are seen as the sole agents of God in Judah. Earlier in this book, Malachi has roundly condemned the priests for corruption, for despising God and misleading the people. Now, he says, they face judgment from a messenger of the Lord. Like the accused in the courts of that time and now, they will stand to hear the verdict but be unable to remain standing at the appearance of God's messenger. That messenger will have an effect on them like a refiner's fire or fuller's soap.

Those are powerful images, although we may have lost sight of their power a bit in 21st Century Lynnwood. Some of our hymns, like "How Firm a Foundation" still make use of the refiner

image. The anonymous American writer of that hymn in the late 1700's perhaps had this verse in mind when he wrote of God's promise, "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply. The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine." A refiner uses a blazing hot fire, white hot even in Biblical times, to melt raw metallic ore, separating the pure metal from impurities. A fuller, in those times, was a worker with fabric, one who treated newly-shorn wool or newly-woven material with caustic lye in order to whiten and purify it. I remember being fascinated by this reference as a boy because my grandmother's maiden name was Fuller. We don't use much lye now, or even bleach, but those who have or who remember its use by prior generations know how dangerous it is, how it can burn unprotected skin or eyes.

The process of encountering the messenger of the Lord, Malachi says, is one that carries a price. Your hearts, he says to the priests, must be purified and it's going to feel like the hottest fire, like the harshest chemical. The messenger is going to get you right with God, so that your offerings to the Lord can be acceptable. In the words of that soaring soprano part in "Messiah," "He shall purify!" Malachi speaks to the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem but we would do well to remember that, as followers of Christ, we are a nation of priests, as John wrote in Revelation; a royal priesthood, as it says in I Peter. Malachi's challenge is a challenge to us as well. Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, a Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta, says of Malachi's promised messenger, "He comes to boil off the impurities in our souls and to apply a coarse scrub brush to our spirits."

The messenger spoken of by Malachi has generally been associated by Christians with John the Baptizer. His message was certainly fiery enough. Unlike Malachi, we know a fair amount about John. Luke tells us that he began his preaching at a very specific time, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." There is no mistaking John for a fairy tale figure or the construct of someone's fantastic imagination. He came to a time as real as ours, a time of war and terrorism and corruption in high places. He comes preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," Luke tells us. John's message is that God stands ready to forgive, to proclaim peace with each one, but peace comes with a price. First, there must be repentance; not just "sorry about that, Chief," but μετανοια, a turning away from old habits and old ways of doing, a turning toward God. The Catholic scholar, John J. Pilch, writes, "The Greek word and its Hebrew counterpart were very familiar to (John's) listeners. In ordinary daily life the words meant simply "a change of mind." In a religious context the same words took on the meaning of "broadening of horizons, transformation of experience, reform of life." The price for peace is changing one's life and outlook. In token of this, a baptism. This would have been another great price for many of John's audience, for in first century Judaism, baptism was generally reserved for new converts, Gentiles who were pledging their allegiance to Yahweh and the children of Israel. For those who saw themselves as the Children of Abraham, this would have been quite a humbling experience. Baptism, though, was not entirely unknown by some Jews. That peculiar little sect of Essenes at Qumran also used baptism to symbolize inner purification and "turning away". Qumran's "The Rule of the Community" says, "[prospective members of the community] shall not enter the water [in order] to share in the pure meal of the saints, for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn from evil-doing; for all who transgress [God's] word are unclean."

Drawing on the words of the prophet Isaiah, Luke describes John's message as "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.'" John's message was that to enter into peace, God's people would need changes as radical as road construction. That really is the ancient image that Isaiah and Luke are drawing on. In those times, when a king would want to pay a visit to a province away from his capital, the royal road engineers would immediately set about improving the nearly non-existent roads so that he would have a comfortable trip. High places would be leveled, low places filled in, crooked sections made straight. It was just as messy and as inconvenient as road construction is today, if not more so. That is the kind of total rearrangement of life required to prepare for the presence of the Prince of Peace.

And what does John's message to the Jews who had not yet even heard of Jesus have to do with us? Why is our preparation for the joyous festival of Christ's birth so rudely interrupted by talk of purification and repentance? Advent is not simply a time to get ready for the presents and carols and parties of Christmas Eve and Christmas day. The function of Advent has always been to help us to focus on the fact that Christ came not just once to a manger in Bethlehem but that Christ comes again and again, daily into our lives. The experience of Emmanuel, God with Us, is one that we encounter anew over and over. Many of us here, no doubt, remember a specific moment in which we first experienced repentance, μετανοια, most fully, when we turned to embrace God and committed our lives to following Jesus. But the world turns us around and our turning back to God must come again and again. The season of Advent and the inclusion of the Baptizer's rude presence in it is to help remind us that we must continually reform our lives so that we may experience and spread shalom, the peace of God which passes all understanding, both in our relationships with God and with each other.

To put it another way, our high places must be leveled and our low places filled. Hear some more words of wisdom from Scott Black Johnston: "Sometimes the things that we need purged from our spirits are precisely those aspects of our personality that we are most proud of; even those pieces of us that we consider to be our strengths and our virtues are at risk when the purifier of souls comes to town. This is the promise of the season. The gift of Malachi is to picture for us a God who lays out fire and soap this Advent, a God who wants to cleanse us from everything that would prevent us from standing in awe at the manger." Now, I'm sure that none of the rest of you has this problem, but I am often, as Hamlet said, "very proud... (yet) with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in." Sometimes, I fall victim to the thoughts of that more recent bard, Mac Davis, who wrote, "Oh Lord it's hard to be humble When you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror, 'Cuz I get better lookin' each day. To know me is to love me; I must be a (heck) of a man. Oh Lord it's hard to be humble But I'm doin' the best that I can." Sometimes, my high places need to be leveled and I need to be reminded that I have numerous flaws, especially as regards my calling and that of every Christian, to be the hands and face of Christ wherever I may go, to minister in Christ's name to the hungry and the thirsty, to the poor and the prisoners, to those who are weary and in need of compassion. And to those others who are "perfect in every way," as well. Aren't they annoying? But I know none of y'all have this problem.

Strangely enough, though, sometimes I have the reverse problem. Sometimes, my low places need to be filled. Some days, I feel like nothing I do is right, that I've blown it all day long, that my offhand remark must have offended that friend I was talking to, that my work isn't up to par, that I'm a disappointment to my friends and a point of delighted ridicule for my enemies. And, even worse, there are days when I seem to revel in this misery. I almost seem to enjoy playing at "poor, poor, pitiful me... nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'm going to go eat worms." The temptation is as great to be pathetic as it is to be proud. It can be a wonderful excuse for not fulfilling that calling I just mentioned, that calling to be a fully functioning member of the Body of Christ. "Lord, you just can't expect much from me," is what I tell God, "You know I'm just not good for anything." Sometimes, my low places need to be filled so that I can be what God made me to be.

Now, hear the Good News. Advent is road construction season. Listen again to that message from Isaiah but now hear it in the context of the promise at its end: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" The promise is that all humankind, all creation, shall come to know the shalom of God. I love the language of the King James Version, the words that Handel used: "Every valley shall be exalted!" Peace is available to us. There is a price to it, but it is a price we can manage. In fact, God gives us the grace and strength we need to manage the price of repentance. Luke records in Acts 5:31 that God through Christ gives to God's people the gift of repentance. Perhaps that's why Jesus taught that the father of the Prodigal Son ran out to embrace that wandering boy before the young man ever had a chance to issue his planned speech of repentance.

The Good News is that our God is a God of forgiveness. In I John we read, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Part of our experience of peace and our ability to be peacemakers is knowing that we are forgiven. In his book, Living Faith, former President Jimmy Carter says that forgiveness is fundamental to his life. He says that without the knowledge that he can be forgiven, it would be impossible for him to face his own shortcomings. Carter writes that both he and his wife, Rosalyn, are "strong-willed" people who can find it difficult to admit being wrong. One day, he writes, after a particularly disturbing argument, Carter decided that he would never let another day end with each of them angry with the other. So he went out to his wood shop and cut a thin piece of walnut, a little smaller than a bank check. On it, he carved the words, "Each evening forever, this is good for an apology or forgiveness, as you desire." He presented the plaque to his wife and, he reports, so far, he has been able to honor it each time Rosalyn has presented it to him. The knowledge that forgiveness is forthcoming makes it easier to admit fault. A relationship can never be healthy if one party is afraid to apologize. Part of the peace that comes to our hearts with Christ is knowing that we are and will be forgiven.

So, what do we do with this assurance of forgiveness, with this promise of peace and re-engineered lives? Perhaps, on this Second Sunday of Advent, as Richard Wilson writes, "as followers of the Prince of Peace we are called to find a dissenting voice in a warring world." Since, Wilson says, "those who rally the majority for war are confident in the power of the many to overpower the few (and) those who protest for peace are confident that they might empower

the few with a hope of transforming the goals of the many,” perhaps, “we are called to protest any and every attempt to overpower the few.” Our calling is always toward peace, always towards upsetting the status quo of Malachi’s priests or Luke’s tetrarchs. Peace, as the title of Wilson’s article tells us, is impertinent. “Peace,” he writes, “is about striving to be empowered and transformed by the presence of God in our midst. To speak in favor of peace always is to find a dissenting voice, a voice that articulates what could be--what should be--for followers of Jesus.”

So, in the words of Zechariah at the birth of his son John who was to become the Baptizer, “Blessed be the God of Israel,” the God who forgives us, who rescues us, and who guides our weary feet in the way of peace. We are promised the coming of peace with Emmanuel, God who is with us every day of our lives from the time we invite him in. We read of it in our scriptures and we experience it in our lives. For God’s peace, thanks be to God.