

Sermon “The Way of Peace”

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Luke 1: 68-79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 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."

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Have you ever seen an angel?

I have never seen an angel. But I remember going into a home where my hospice patient was no longer opening her eyes or speaking, she was close to death and appeared very peaceful. Her son told me that a few days earlier, in one of her last conversations, she told him that there was an angel over the door jam. He couldn't see it. But it gave her great comfort. It gave her peace.

Prior to our gospel reading this morning, Zechariah had been visited by an angel of the Lord, the angel Gabriel. Zechariah was up there in years, married to Elizabeth who is also elderly. And they were childless. Luke tells us that Zechariah, even though he was a priest, was terrified and overwhelmed with fear when he saw that angel. "Terrified."

The angel, Gabriel, told him not to be afraid and then told him something amazing. That angel told him that his prayers had been answered and he would have a son. But he also told him something amazing about his son. The angel told Zechariah

¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Now Zechariah was a holy man, a priest and a man of authority in his faith. Luke tells us that he and his wife were righteous. But Zechariah questioned the angel's prediction. He asked how that could be because he and his wife were too old to have children.

Zechariah's doubt angered the angel, who replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Zechariah was made mute. For nearly nine months he could not speak. Can you imagine being unable to speak? Can you imagine the affect it would have on you if your job, your purpose in life was to pray aloud in the temple? Talk about having your life turned upside down!

People knew something extraordinary happened when Zechariah came out of the sanctuary unable to speak. In silence, he returned home. At home, Elizabeth was pregnant with a son and felt that the Lord had taken away her "disgrace." While Zechariah was suffering in silence, Elizabeth felt that the Lord had redeemed her.

I wonder what Zechariah thought about as he waited for his son to be born. Did he hear the angel's words over and over again? Did he wonder what it meant that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit, that his son would have the power of that great prophet Elijah in him, that his son would turn people to God, turn the hearts of parents to their children, and turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous? Had Zechariah heard that his son was prepare the people for the Lord?

Finally, his son is born. He is a healthy, strong, beautiful baby boy. So Zechariah and Elizabeth brought him to the synagogue to be named. And Zechariah looked at him, remembered his conversation with the angel, and knew what a blessing the baby boy is. When asked his name, Zechariah writes "John"

His speech was restored. He was miraculously able to speak again. And he shared amazing words.

First, he speaks as a priest, to all who are present. He speaks about God's mercy to his people and the fulfillment of God's promise that is now taking place.

Then he speaks to his new son. He tells him of his calling, of his future, of his role in the redemption of the world.

I invite you to close your eyes and picture Zechariah speaking these words to the infant that he was holding in his arms, recalling that he was told that this baby, his son, who would be the prophet that prepares the world for the Messiah.

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 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."

I believe Zechariah spoke his words with the authority of a priest but also with tenderness, gentleness, and awe of a new father. For him to have a son in his old age was unbelievable. And that his son was to be a prophet, not just any prophet, but the one who prepares the way for the Messiah, was a miracle. What an awesome moment, to hold this baby boy and to know that his son was part of God's promise and plan for his people. His son would prepare the people for the coming of their Lord, who would give them light and guide their feet in the ways of peace.

New parents look at their children with awe. I remember when my daughters were born. I remember holding them and marveling at their hair, their eyes, nose and mouth, their 10 fingers and 10 toes, and yes, even that first cry where they made their presence known.

I remember my pride at their accomplishments as they grew and I had the refrigerator covered with art work and photos to prove it. I remember watching them grow and become their own person, hoping for the best for them but also hoping that they would develop the gifts that God had given them. Because we all have gifts.

Because God has a plan for every child, for everyone.

Well, we as parents, may not have been visited by an angel, or have the insight or wisdom of Zechariah to know God's plan for our children, or sometimes even for ourselves. But God still has a plan, for everyone.

And God's plan is a plan for peace. God has shared her plan for peace through the ages.

It was shared with God's people by the prophet Isaiah. We hear this in Isaiah chapter 9.

*² *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.
⁶ 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.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (9:1-2, 6-7)*

We hear it again in Isaiah chapter 32.

¹⁶Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. ¹⁷The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. ¹⁸My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (32: 16-18)

When Isaiah also speaks of peace, he connects it to justice and righteousness. They go together, they belong together. Peace, justice, righteousness – they are all part of God’s plan.

We are called to seek justice and righteousness for all people, not just those we know or those who look like us, but all people. We all have a place in God’s plan for a just, righteous and peaceful world. So how do we participate in God’s plan? Perhaps we can take to heart God’s messages in scripture of old or maybe we can hear the words of recent prophets.

Francis of Assisi once said, *“While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart.”*

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama said, “We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace with ourselves.”

Thich Nhat Hanh said, “If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work.

Nelson Mandela said, “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”

John Lennon said, “Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will be as one.

Peace within ourselves. Peace in our imaginations. Sharing a smile. Working with our enemies or those with whom we disagree. There are many ways to spread peace.

We start by having peace in our own hearts. With peace in our hearts, we can have peace in our lives. Then we can reach out to others; we can participate in God’s plan for justice and righteousness. Perhaps we will heed the words of prophets, perhaps we will work with others who are sent by God to guide us. Perhaps we will hear angels.

This week, I invite you to imagine what God’s angel would say to you if he or she were to appear to you this Advent. What if God’s angel were to tell you that you would help birth peace? How might God call you to participate in God’s plan for peace? Maybe you will initially doubt that it will happen, like Zachariah. Or maybe you will believe that, with God, you can help make it happen. Then I invite you, with the Candle of Peace burning in your heart, to partner with God and bring peace into a little piece of our world.

