



## “A Royal Welcome: Welcoming Peace”

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*Luke 3:1-6*

Last week we encountered an apocalyptic text that beckoned us to hope, to know that God had not only come to earth as Jesus Christ, but that we could also hope that God would indeed come again at the end of the age and make everything new. And, I don't know about you, but for me that felt like a strange way to begin Advent and the Christmas season. Well, folks, today's text isn't any better. We totally skip over the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, that well-worn, familiar tale where the animals kept watch, the shepherds were sore afraid, and the angels sang “Gloria!” We even leapfrogged over the foretelling to Zechariah and Elizabeth of the birth of their son, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Couldn't we have at least had someone's birth in the Gospel text for today? But no, we go straight to the third chapter of Luke when Jesus approached John in the wilderness, to be baptized, to follow the throngs of humanity into a new way of being in the world. Jesus went into the wilderness to find God, because it is in the wilderness where peace happens. In Advent, we too come into the wilderness to make ready to welcome the Prince of Peace.

But, this story of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness is normal this time of year. The lectionary always leads us to this scripture highlighting the one who cried out to us, the one who asked us to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to the even greater one who would come. And in this second week of Advent, we are reminded that before hope comes, before peace comes, before joy comes, before love arrives that there is a time of waiting in the wilderness. And we need the divine space of the wilderness right now. Because in the bustling of the city as we run around town buying gifts, pushing through crowded stores, distracted by twinkling lights and obnoxious Christmas carols, it is easy to miss the voice of God in this season. I can see why the authors of the lectionary would want to remind us of the pronouncement that someone is coming into this world who is greater, and more powerful, and more loving, and who would bring peace. I think it's because we often don't feel very peaceful this time of year. We need to stop and take a moment to welcome peace.

So, how does John the Baptist, a voice calling out in the wilderness, and Jesus coming to be baptized relate to Advent? How can an opening narrative of a prophet, a baptizer, and a Messiah be an appropriate story of Christmas? I think this third chapter of Luke reveals that Advent is a time of waiting, anticipation, and coming. For you see, Jesus came out of the wilderness and approached John, he waited in the long line of humanity to be baptized into a new way of life, and then he went back out into the wilderness after his baptism to find silence and solitude, gathering strength for his mission and ministry in the world. I think the feeling of being in the wilderness is much more like Advent than we care to admit because just like those first century Christians who were being persecuted by the Empire and didn't know how their story would end or if they'd ever make it out of the wilderness of fear and foreboding, we too need the good news

of salvation and peace. And the only way good news would come to them and now comes to us is if we listen for God and push through the wilderness moments of our lives.

As we welcome peace in this Advent season, we might not be looking for that peace in the right places. We often rely on our religious leaders, our political pundits, our sports icons, and our activists to do that hard work of peacemaking. But we see in our Gospel text for today that peace bypasses all of the powerful and influential people. Peace personified bypassed all the big places, and the big palaces, and the big names of power and walked deep into the wilderness. Peace skipped over political and religious places and landed in a manger, with animals, in a lowly bed. And that is why it is important for us look for peace to come, not from the big places of our lives, but in the wild and wonderful wilderness moments.

And like I said, we shouldn't expect to find peace from our political leaders, the Tiberiuses of the world, the Pilates, and the Herods. We shouldn't expect peace to only come from the priests of the world, the religious leaders, the Annases and the Caiaphases. No, peace begins with the lone voice, the voice of the bedraggled and disheveled prophet, the voice of the one calling out in the middle of nowhere. It is the solitary voice that must echo among the vast wasteland. It is the solitary voice that tips the scale so that the realm of God washes over the world in a baptism of powerful peace. This Gospel text list of rulers contrasts the human kingdoms with God's reign. The claims to authority that Tiberius or Herod or the high priests may make are not enough to bring peace to the world. It is God's word of peace that set John's ministry in motion. John was commissioned to prepare the way not for lord Caesar or any other earthly leader, but for the one true Lord, the Prince of Peace.

My friend Kyle Childress, the senior pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, says it this way, "The word of God came to John out in the wilderness, so says Luke. After giving us the names and offices of the powerful in his day – Tiberius Caesar, Governor Pontius Pilate of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas the high priests – Luke says the word of God comes to none of them. Bypassing the centers of power, the word comes to one outside."

Monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, said that we must understand we are constantly in a world inhospitable to God Incarnate, the Prince of Peace. And it was in that world that Jesus came, not to the insiders, but to those on the outside because the inside was too crowded. The Inn was too full and there was no room for Jesus. The places of power were too busy and there was no room for Jesus. The hearts of people were too hard and there was no place for Jesus. Merton said, "There is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention." There is no room for the Good News because it is drowned out with all of the noise of this world.

So, we must pay attention and listen, because the peace of God will come in that one voice in the wilderness, just as it will come in the cry of a baby in a manger. It is our job this Advent to wait in the wilderness and notice the voices on the outside, the voices of peace. But that's difficult for us to do because our ways are not God's ways. Our striving for peace usually bypasses John; yet God seeks John out. We think God is in the booming thunder and mighty rains, but God's voice is in the wilderness and is carried by a dove. We think that high mountains and big buildings and

powerful people are those that can bring peace to the world when, in reality, God is wandering in the wilderness, filling every valley, bringing every mountain low, smoothing out every rough way, and making straight all that is crooked. Episcopalian and New Testament Professor, Judith Jones, says, “The claims that the world’s authorities make often conflict with God’s claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God’s bulldozers reshape the world’s social systems and the landscape of our own minds and hearts. God’s ways are not our ways.”

The emperors in our lives want us to think that it is in the bustling halls of power and privilege that peace will surely come. But peace doesn’t show up there. Author and Professor, William Lamar contends that, “we must not bypass John in the interest of imperial theology. To bypass John is to bypass God.” The presence and pronouncement of John the Baptist tells us something of how we can find peace. John wants the people to find peace by encountering a baptism of repentance. John’s baptism of repentance was not simply a call for honesty and integrity. It was calling for those in the wilderness to lift their voices and join in the movement of justice in the world. John was birthing a new realm of God just as Mary would birth the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace. John was calling for the world to change just as Jesus came to change everything.

And, when we attempt to speak a word of peace into a tumultuous time, when we attempt to baptize the powers of the Empire with the waters of redemption, it will often be met with resistance. John was a direct threat to imperial theology and power and so he was beheaded. Jesus ushered in a realm of God that brought the outcasts into the circle and those one the margins into the middle, and for that, he was hung on a tree. Lifting our single, solitary voice for peace might seem like a small cry in a vast wilderness, but all of our voices together can cause the systems of the world to change. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to lift your voice and welcome peace?

In his book, New Fables Thus Spoke, Kurt Kauter tells of a small, single, solitary action that builds and builds until it creates a major change in nature. Here’s the story:

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a chickadee asked a wild dove.

“Nothing more than nothing,” was the answer.

“In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story,” the chickadee said.

“I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow-not heavily, not in a raging blizzard-no, just like a dream, without a sound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch, nothing more than nothing, as you say-the branch broke off.”

Having said that, the chickadee flew away.

The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself, “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come to the world.”

And so, the lectionary year after year inaugurates Advent in the wilderness because it is in that wilderness where good news has its beginnings, where each one of our voices beats the rhythm of peace. It is in the wilderness of our lives where character is built. It is in the wilderness of our

lives where confidence in God's power is shaped. It is in the wilderness of our lives where the promise of salvation is found. It is in the wilderness where one voice can change the world. So, I think during Advent, we are beckoned to wait patiently and to lift our voices, not in fear, but in the hope that the Christ Child will come to us in the wilderness of our lives, as long as we pay attention.

My favorite author and mystic, Henri Nouwen, asks us to lean into the pronouncement of angels, to pay attention, to give energy to the Advent waiting, and to not fear. He says, "Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, 'Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.'"

So, pay attention, Church. Pay attention to the lines of humanity standing with you in the wilderness. Pay attention to those crippled, limping to the river. Pay attention to those grieving, crying streams in the desert. Pay attention to those in pain, seeking to wash away the hurt. Pay attention to the lonely, those standing in the sea of civilization but utterly isolated. Pay attention to the lost, those in the wilderness of life who are following that solitary voice of the prophet, hoping to find the peace of God. Pay attention. Because it is in the wilderness, with all of the wandering and wonderfully diverse people of the world that you will find a word of peace, a word that someone is coming who will wipe away every tear, cast away all of our doubts, and bring God's great peace to the world. Pay attention. For the Prince of Peace is coming and we must be ready to welcome him in.

Amen.