

*How to Hope for Peace*

Luke 1:68-79; 3:1-6

Whitefish UMC

Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009

- † The cadets of West Point sat stony-faced as their Commander-in-Chief addressed them with gravity and resigned resolve. Trained not to show emotion in such settings, the cadets listened as they learned that many of them would likely be sent to fight an ambiguous enemy in Afghanistan.
- † How ironic that the message that our nation will send more young men and women into war was delivered in the week that Christians around the country light the second candle in the advent wreath—the candle of peace.
- † The confluence of these events begs the question: is hope for peace a delusional sentiment in these perilous times? As military families and those they love prepare for yet another deployment to an exceedingly difficult war zone, are prayers for peace hollow?
- † Is it just a matter of the spiritual equivalent of whistling in the dark to long for peace and believe that it is not only possible but realistic? These are questions that haunt us this day.
- † Is there consolation—hope, even—in knowing that we are not the first people living in a time of turmoil to ask these questions? The scriptures from the prophets of old remind us that Israel lived in exile, longing for peace in the midst of deprivation and despair.

- † Today's passages relating to John the Baptist, the one who came before Jesus to "prepare the way of the Lord" echo the prophets' promise of peace in the midst of a violent world.
- † The prophets of old, then Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and then John himself see a vision of something coming that isn't here yet, an alternative vision of creation healed, mended, reconciled. To be sure, we're not there yet.
- † But the yearning for peace is timeless and universal. All people want peace for themselves and their children. It is a longing that is deep within the human heart.
- † The Bible affirms this longing in the Old and New Testaments. For Israel, the children of Abraham, peace was illusive, too. Other than a fairly brief period of time, a hundred years at most, with King David's reign in the middle, Israel didn't have much peace.
- † Buffeted by powerful enemies—Assyria, Babylon, Egypt—Israel was invaded, occupied, held hostage, and sent into exile. But all the while, a hope for the day of peace would not die.
- † The people of Israel knew that God means for there to be peace—a peace not based on military victory, but on justice, in the fair, equal, compassionate treatment of all the people. The day of the Lord, the coming of God's messiah, would be—more than anything else—and occasion for peace.
- † In the earliest parts of the Gospels, at the birth of Jesus, an angel chorus sings about peace on earth. At Jesus' dedication in the temple, old Simeon says, "Lord let now thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen my salvation."

- † When Jesus grows up, he instructs his disciples that when they enter a house they should say a blessing, “Peace be to this house.” When he approached Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus stopped when he saw the city walls and towers and gates gleaming on Mount Zion.
- † He wept, and he said, “If only you had know the things that make for peace.” And later that day, as he entered the city to the cheers and hosannas of the crowd, the people said, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven!”
- † Of course the first thing the risen Jesus said to his disciples when he appeared in their midst was “Peace be with you.” And when the first Christians worshipped, they passed the peace, just as we do today, repeating the words of the risen Lord, embracing or shaking hands: “Peace be with you.”
- † All well and good, you say (and I do, too), but what difference does it make?
- † When I get discouraged, as I did this week, I turn to wiser people than I am for hope and for guidance. In a book of readings for Advent, Watch for the Light, I found a reflection written by Father Alfred Delp in 1945. A Jesuit priest, Father Delp wrote passionately about the need to keep hope for peace active and alive, even in the midst of the deepest darkness.
- † Condemned as a traitor for his opposition to Adolf Hitler, Father Delp wrote this piece in a Nazi prison shortly before he was hanged. He speaks of Advent as a time of being shaken awake out of complacency.
- † In his imagination, the priest fixes on a slightly different nativity scene from ours here today. The three figures in his Advent drama are

the angel of annunciation, the blessed woman, and crier in the wilderness. His advent experience is one of greater intensity and anticipation than ever before. No wonder.

- † He writes: “I have a new and different understanding of God’s promise of redemption and release from my cell and irons and ahead of me an uncertain fate.”
- † Father Delp remembers an angel that was given to him two years earlier for Advent by a kind person. The angel bore the inscription, “Rejoice for the Lord is near.” He goes on to say: “The angel was destroyed by a bomb. A bomb killed the man who gave it to me, and I often feel he is doing me the service of an angel.”
- † “The horror of these times,” he goes on to say, “would be unendurable unless we kept being cheered and set upright again by the promises that are spoken. The angels of annunciation, speaking their message of blessing into the midst of anguish, scattering their seed of blessing that will one day spring up amid the night, call us to hope.
- † They are not yet the loud angels of rejoicing and fulfillment that come out into the open, the angels of Advent. Quiet, inconspicuous, they come into rooms and hearts as they did then. Quietly they bring God’s questions and proclaim to us the wonders of God, for whom nothing is impossible.”
- † “For all its earnestness, Advent is a time of inner security, because it has received a message. Oh, if it ever happens that we forget the message and the promises; if all we know is the four walls and the prison windows of our gray days; if we can no longer hear the gentle step of the announcing angels; if our soul no longer is at once shaken

and exalted by their whispered word—then it will be all over with us. We are living wasted time and are dead before they do us any harm.”

- † “The first thing we must do if we want to be alive is to believe in the golden seed of God that the angels have scattered and still offer to open hearts. The second thing is to walk through these gray days oneself as an announcing messenger.”
- † Father Delp then goes on to praise the light and faith that come from the body of the blessed woman, Mary. But then, rather surprisingly, he adds the figure of John the Baptist, the one who cries out in the wilderness, to the nativity scene of his imagination.
- † “Woe to an age when the voices of those who cry in the wilderness have fallen silent, outshouted by the noise of the day or outlawed or swallowed up in the intoxication of progress, or growing smothered and fainter for fear or cowardice. The devastation will soon be so terrifying and universal that the word ‘wilderness’ will again strike our hearts and minds.”
- † The world needs John the Baptist like characters—people like himself—willing to challenge the powers of oppression and call the people to repentance. In a poignant commentary on the devastation of Europe during the last days of World War II, he writes:
- † “O Lord, today we know once more, and in quite practical terms, what it means to clear away the rubble and make paths smooth again [referring of course to today’s scripture passage]. We will have to know it and do it for years to come. Let the crying voices ring out, pointing out the wilderness and overcoming the devastation from within.”

- † Yet amidst all this destruction, Father Delp invites his readers (and himself): “Let us live in today’s Advent, for it is the time of promise. To eyes that do not see, it still seems that the dice are being cast down on these valleys, in these battlefields, in those camps and prisons and bombshelters. Those who are awake sense the working of the other powers and can await the coming of their hour.”
- † Sixty-four years later, we face a similar challenge. Can we find hope for peace in the midst of the chaos of these days? Can we unclutter our lives enough to sense the promised coming of the Prince of Peace? And can we make room in our busyness to offer ourselves to be a part of that peace?
- † What if you made a space for ringing the Salvation Army bells? What if you wrote a letter of encouragement to someone in a war zone—physical or emotional? What if you found time to participate in the political process to work for peace or compassion or justice?
- † I know, it doesn’t seem as if it makes much of a difference—and there is so much to do this time of year! But I love what Dr. Roland Walker, a faculty member at Ohio Wesleyan University almost a hundred years ago wrote:
- † “To the Governing General of the Universe, Dear Sir: ‘I hereby resign my self-appointed position as directing superintendent of my own life and the world. I cannot level all the mountains of injustice, nor fill the valleys of selfishness. There is too much of it in me. I hereby turn over to you for your disposition and use, my life, my money, my time, and my talent to be at your disposal.’ Signed, Your obedient servant, Rolly Walker.

- † And if some cynic challenges you in your small attempt at making peace, remember these words spoken by the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church to a New York Times reporter. The reporter, condescendingly granting that the church was doing some good things by offering a latchkey program for poor children, implementing a redevelopment agency in Harlem, and boycotting overpriced supermarkets, said:
- † “You’re doing some good things here. But it’s hard to see what difference any of it is making. What keeps you folks going?” The pastor’s answer was a classic and I wish I had said it.
- † “We’ve read the Bible,” he said, “and we know how it ends. We aren’t at the end yet.” Yes, we know how it ends—with God, and God’s creation complete, healed, fulfilled, reconciled at last, and all of God’s people, all people, living together in justice and kindness and peace.
- † Hopeless? Unrealistic? Delusional? I love what one professor from the University of Chicago said: “I do not think we are in a very good situation historically. I do not believe that our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better until it gets catastrophically worse....I have no great expectations that human cussedness will somehow be quickly modified and turned into generosity or that humanity’s care of the earth will improve much.
- † But I do go around planting trees on the campus.” And he did, until he died just recently.
- † So will you join me in becoming an angel of annunciation, a blessed woman (or man), and a crier in the wilderness this Advent?

- † Let us close with these final words of Father Delp: “Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness.
- † But just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come....It is all far off, still, and only just announced and foretold.
- † But it is happening. This is today. And tomorrow the angels will tell what has happened with loud rejoicing voices, and we shall know it and be glad, if we have believed and trusted in Advent. Amen.

#### Sources”

Fr. Alfred Delp, “The Shaking Reality of Advent,” Watch for the Light. Plough Publishing, 2002.

Dr. Wiley Stephens, “Uncluttering,” <http://day1.org>

John Buchanan, “Hope or Humbug,” <http://fourthchurch.org>