

Church of the Crossroads
The Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2006
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ADVENT 2: A COMMUNITY OF PEACE

The Benedictus
Luke 1:68-79

I have chosen a text for this sermon. It is taken from the passage of scripture we have come to know as The Benedictus. We sang it this morning as a chant. Scriptural tradition holds that the Benedictus was spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. It is found in the first Chapter of Luke, and it takes the form of a hymn. It ends with these words,

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in night
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The way of peace – this is to be our way as a people who celebrate the realm of God which has broken upon us in Jesus the Christ, and is yet to come in its fullness.

The realm of God, the kingdom of God as scripture calls it, past, present, and future, informs the life, ministry, and mission of the people of God. Apart from that realm, in which we are asked to place our trust, all hope for us becomes false hope. Apart from our trust in the fulfillment of that realm, all human efforts to bring about peace in our world will end up to be futile.

God seeks to be present among us to guide our feet into the path of peace, but we all too often take things into our own hands. Whether we're talking about humankind in general, or American humankind, or Christian humankind, humankind is not going to ring in the perfect world, the finished product, or the ideal state in which all are safe and secure. That kind of wishful thinking constitutes false hope, and when we get hung up on that kind of false hope, we inevitably make the situation worse!

A case in fact is Iraq. The rationale for entering into a war in Iraq was that by doing so we would take the first step towards the end of terrorism and its threat. What has happened is exactly the opposite. The war has only served to make matters worse. Terrorism is more of a threat now than ever before.

War is clearly not the answer. Not only has it increased terrorism in the world, but it has produced untold consequences for the American people. Our health care system is in a shambles. Social security is at risk. There are not enough financial resources to nurture a quality public education for all of our people. In the meanwhile, we are spending 2 billion a week, 8 billion a month on Iraq and the total cost of this tragic misadventure will likely exceed 2 trillion dollars.

That is what happens when we rely on the old solutions and take things into our own hands. We can surely say that since the 2nd world war, all of our war making has accomplished little or nothing.

When the Benedictus affirms that God will lead us into the way of peace and save us from our enemies, it has in mind something other than the way of war. It was, after all, written in retrospect. It was written in light of the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was written, knowing that Jesus was born to be a Prince of Peace, a Savior who blessed the peacemakers, who bid us love our enemies and do good to those who would do us harm, and who, on the night of his arrest, told Peter to put away his sword.

The Christian community, in its advent waiting, celebrates the God who has come to us in Jesus, who has shown us the way of peace, and the God who is to come, whose realm of peace will be fulfilled one day in our world. Herein we find our authentic hope and the source of our own witness for peace and justice.

Some were discouraged by last week's sermon when I suggested that on our own we cannot bring about the world for which we long. The sermon I preached was not meant to discourage us. It was meant to instill in us the authentic rather than false hope that comes when we place our trust in God rather than ourselves. Let us be assured, we do have a part to play. God seeks to work through us, surely. God seeks to guide our feet into the way of peace, as the Benedictus proclaims.

In light of what I have just said, we ought to be encouraged by the Baker report which outlines a different kind of approach to ending the war in Iraq than the one that is currently in place. Let us have no illusions, however. The President has already indicated that he is unwilling to act on the three main recommendations that represent the essence of the report. Somehow, we must set aside our hope that this war will end quickly and easily. We must place our hope in God who wills peace for the world if we but learn to walk the way of peace.

It may be helpful, in this regard, to turn to Reihhold Niebuhr's idea of "proximate goals." There is nothing we human beings can do to bring about a perfect world, but there are proximate goals within our reach. It seems to me that the Baker report and its recommendations represent the kind of goals Niebuhr had in mind. We can do all we can to urge its adoption by the decision makers of the nation.

There are other proximate goals we can work on, closer to home. For one thing, we can be certain that our beloved Church of the Crossroads becomes more and more a community of peace. When we think of a community of peace, we know that peace is not the absence of differences but a way of living with and celebrating difference. We also know that peace is not the absence of conflict but a way of working through conflict and towards reconciliation.

I am afraid that churches (perhaps ours as well) tend to put on a "happy face" and are reluctant to face openly any kind of conflict that may be lurking in the background. We thus live an illusion of peace rather than actually walking the way of peace. Church communities are often filled with what Henri Nouwen has called "backstage hostility." On stage, the actors are friendly and loving, but backstage there is enmity and conflict.

In this context, silence can be the enemy of peace. Someone this week shared with me a comic strip, the one called *One Big Happy*. The little girl sees a man beating his dog, and says, "Excuse me, you shouldn't be mean to your dog like that." The man replies to the little girl, "Excuse me, don't you know that silence is golden?" Replies the little girl: "Excuse me, not according to my Grandpa. He says that sometimes it's just plain yellow!"

The way of peace requires intentionality, openness, the courage not to be silent but honest with one another, a willingness to forgive one another as God has forgiven us, and, surely, a commitment to follow the path of peace God in Christ sets before us. Yes, the creation of a community of peace can be a proximate goal for us.

And there is also the proximate goal of peace within ourselves. If our interior life is filled with unresolved conflict and turmoil, that conflict and turmoil will inevitably spell out and begin to affect all of our human relationships. It will even affect the way we understand God. Mary Oliver has written a provocative poem, called *The Fist*.

*There are days
when the sun goes down
like a fist,
though of course*

*if you see anything
in the heavens
in this way
you had better get*

*your eyes checked
or, better still,
your diminished spirit.
The heavens*

*have no fist,
or wouldn't they have been
shaking it
for a thousand years now,*

*or even
longer than that,
at the dull, brutish
ways of mankind –*

*heaven's own
creation?
Instead, such patience!
Such willingness*

*to let us continue!
to hear,
little by little,
the voices –*

*only, so far,
in pockets of the world –
suggesting
the possibilities*

*of peace?
Keep looking.
Behold, how the fist opens
with invitation.*

- from *Thirst* by Mary Oliver
(Beacon Press)

To create peace within ourselves and beyond ourselves, we need ‘to hear, little by little, the voices – only, so far, in pockets of the world [and within ourselves, I might add] – suggesting the possibilities of peace.’ Mary Oliver says poetically what Reinhold Niebuhr says theologically. To hear, little by little, the voices suggesting the possibilities of peace will take a different kind of silence, not a silence that serves as a way to avoid conflict, but a silence that invites us to stop our busyness and allows us to listen to others and The Other, a silence that enables us to reflect within ourselves upon the possibilities for peace in our own lives and in the life of our world.

Peace within ourselves is yet another proximate goal we can work towards as we also look towards the fulfillment of God’s realm of peace.

Peace within ourselves, a community of peace, our faithful witness to the possibilities of peace in our world, all these proximate goals belong to the life of the Christian community as it looks to the fulfillment of God’s reign of peace in the earth. None of these are possible, of course, apart from

the grace of God working in us and through us. The grace of which we speak means that the strength to do what we need to do to walk the path of peace comes not from our own abilities or efforts, but comes as a gift from God.

Advent calls us to open ourselves to the grace that God is ready to grant. For it is as we receive the gift of grace that we can keep our hope alive for God's realm of peace to take root in our lives and in our world. Again, in the words of the Benedictus:

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in night
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.