

## **PEACE IN GOD'S EMBRACE**

I suspect most of us have had the experience of being in an embrace where we felt totally at peace and secure. I recall such an embrace during a traumatic experience in my life. And if I have told this story before, I beg your indulgence. I have come to the stage when I can't always remember which stories I have told when. It is also possible that I have become like my father, who told the same stories over and over.

When I was five or six, I fell from the loft in my grandfather's barn. It was about an 8-foot fall to the den floor of the barn where I was watching my grandfather work. I don't recall the fall or the landing. I do remember crying, in my grandfather's embrace as he carried me while running toward the house. There most have been a trip to the doctor and the hospital where it was determined that my arm was broken. I came home with my arm tightly wrapped to my body. For the remainder of the summer, my arm was in a sling. A few weeks later I was running toward the house and tripped. Not being able to break the fall with my arm in a sling, I knocked my mouth against the porch and broke off my two front teeth. In my grade 2 school picture, I was still missing my two front teeth.

As I reflect on this experience of trauma for my young self, I find it interesting to note what I remember. I don't recall much of the trauma itself. What I do recall is feeling totally safe and secure in my grandfather's all-encompassing arms. In his embrace I felt peace.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Peace is the traditional theme. We anticipate God's coming to us in Jesus as "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" As we long for peace to touch our lives, we also consider being called to live into the peace represented in Jesus' birth. This year, more than ever, I long for the peace of God to come to fuller fruition in our world.

*Join me in prayer: Loving God, we comfort ourselves in the words of music heard this morning, reminding us that you are God and that you come to us with saving grace. Jesus, whose birth we will celebrate shortly, came to us as the most powerful sign of your intention for humanity. In Jesus, you came that we might find peace with you, with one another, so that the world might be at peace. Further, you empower us with your Holy Spirit that we too might become agents of your peace in the world. Come to us now and touch us with the life-giving peace made known in Jesus as revealed in scripture. Amen.*

We are living in a time many people are experiencing as traumatic. From the pandemic to political unrest, to fires and floods, to climate change, to growing polarization in our society, I do not recall a time where I felt a greater need for the peace of God to break upon us in a fresh way. As Laur Steven reminded us last Sunday, our Advent theme for this year is, "*Dare to Imagine.*" In the middle of everything that seems so troubling, maybe even traumatic, can we imagine God's peace coming to us in Jesus to make real and lasting change, not only in our lives, but in the world?

While there is much within our traditional celebration of Advent leading up to Christmas that I deeply appreciate, I am also aware that these traditions alone do not have the power to bring about the change and peace for which I long. Maybe it is as the Chris Heubner article Laur referenced last week suggests, that we have made idols of our traditions and that we worship our traditions as much as the one whose birth we seek to celebrate. Perhaps that is why the writers of our worship materials have suggested we think of the traditional theme of peace through fresh lenses. One suggestion is that we think of peace as being in God's all-encompassing embrace, much as I experienced in my grandfather's arms.

The invitation to imagine has the potential to bring about lasting change. When I was leaving my carpentry world to return to pastoral ministry, I was trying to have our son take up some work with one of my clients. My client asked me, "Does your son have your hands?" I said, "yes, but more important, he has

my eyes. Because hands cannot build what eyes cannot see or imagine.” Much as we long for a world that might be touched anew with God’s peace, as people of God’s peace, dare we imagine what it might look like, or feel like, to be fully embraced by God and there find peace and act accordingly?

I envision the process of imagining to be like a journey. A journey that begins in our history as God’s people, weaves its way through the realities of today, and gives glimpses of hope for the future. The scriptures read this morning take us on just such a journey.

Albeit in ways different from today, Malachi 3 is set in troubled times. It is one of the Old Testament passages, along with Isaiah 40, that speaks of a messenger preparing a way for God’s coming into the world. The OT passages imply it was God of the covenant that was coming directly. As we hear in Luke’s gospel, the messenger is John the Baptist, preparing the way of God’s coming in Jesus.

The troubles of Malachi 3 were a long time in the making, as troubles often are. Earlier the people had lived in captivity for 70 years. Their beloved homeland in Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. After 70 years of exile, they were allowed to return home. Filled with hope, they dared to imagine rebuilding the city and the Temple and that a descendant of the much-loved King David would again sit on the throne. By the time of Malachi 3, the Temple had been rebuilt, but there was still no Davidic king on the throne. The people were still poor, there were divisions among the people. In short, the people had become disillusioned.

When people become disillusioned, they often take things into their own hands. That seems to have been the case here. On the one hand, the difficulties over the years led the people to wonder if God even cared for them, or if God had anything to do with their lives at all. There was a total indifference toward the will and way of God in their lives. On the other hand, the people had come back with high expectations of returning to former glory. Had made an idol of their hopes and dreams? It almost seems that they worshipped their hopes and dreams more than the God of the promises made to their ancestor, Abraham. In either case, the people suffered from the loss of an intimate relationship with God.

I wonder if our society is not experiencing something similar. For all my life we have lived with a security that has manifested itself in many ways. A secure climate has meant we could count on rain at the right time resulting in good harvests. While we live with different political opinions, we have lived with political and economic security. For the most part, we have also been able to assume good health. Today many of these things can no longer be assumed as we once did. And I wonder if we have not made something of an idol of the security we once assumed. Have we worshiped our security at the expense of others? The peace that God establishes in Jesus is for all humanity.

Maybe my attempt to draw a parallel between our day and the time of Malachi goes too far. Yet, as I see it, the message of Malachi 3 is one of profound grace. For a people who sat on the edge of believing that God was non-existent, or at best, a distant memory, trust in a covenant of the past seemed irrelevant. They did what they wanted.

Like children who hurry to hide the evidence of a broken lamp before the parents come home, the thought of God coming to them may not have been a comforting. To be sure, there was a note of judgement in God’s coming. In Malachi, judgement was directed toward the priests who had become lax in what was expected in worship. Whereas God had asked that animals brought for sacrifice be without any physical blemishes, priests had allowed blind and lame animals to be sacrificed. It might be argued this was a result of the people’s poverty. While God would have been justified to come with consuming fire, God’s coming was not to consume, but to cleanse and to purify. Pure grace. The request to restore proper forms of worship was to prepare the way for full reconciliation with God and with members of the community.

God's coming reveals God's longing to draw the people into an all-encompassing embrace to restore the peace God intended for humanity from creation. In the difficulties of the time, the people had forgotten God's promises, but God did not forget. God remained true to the promises of old.

Advent is typically seen as a time of remembering with anticipation. As an Easter people, we know how the story unfolds. Jesus has come and will come again. Our waiting and anticipation, therefore, is for God's renewing touch in Jesus for today. As Malachi reminds us, God is in the business of entering the human experience anew even though people may not be expecting God. This Advent, let us not forget those times when God has come to us to hold us in times of difficulty. The reality of today reminds us that we are still a people in need of God's embrace and peace. May memories of the past rekindle within us an expectation of God's all-encompassing embrace of hope and peace - today.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, as told following the birth of John the Baptist, rekindles the promises of God with a hope that projects to the future. We first meet Zechariah and Elizabeth as a couple advanced in years and not able to have children. Without children in those days, was to lack a future. Zechariah was also a priest. In fulfilling his annual priestly duties, the angel Gabriel came to him one day and told him that Elizabeth would have a son. This son would be special in God's sight. Filled with the Holy Spirit he would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. After all these years, God was still in the business of coming to the people with saving grace.

In due time Elizabeth did conceive and John was born. For a couple who once lacked a future, a whole new future opened for them, and not only them, the whole world, including you and me. Because Zechariah did not believe the angel's promise at first, he was not able to speak until John was born. When he finally could speak, he offered up the prophetic words we heard from Luke 1. This brief text takes us on a journey through the exodus, into the monarchy, across the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel and into the hope for a new promise fulfilled first through John the Baptist and then through Jesus. On this journey we are reminded how God HAS been present, so that we might dare to imagine how God is present today and into the future.

Now if I were Zechariah, I think I would have been gushing about the son born in my old age. But the first part of Zechariah's song of praise focuses on Jesus, the one coming to fulfill God's promises and bring salvation to God's people. Only then does he turn his attention to John, ***"And you child..."*** saying how he will ... ***"prepare a way so that the people may have a knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. ... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*** *To guide our feet into the way of peace.* This Advent, more than ever, I long for that way of peace.

As Luke tells the story, he roots it firmly in history. The story unfolds in the time of King Herod. He names the characters, Gabriel, Zechariah and Elizabeth. But when Zechariah speaks, we are transported outside of time. We are taken back in time and transported to the future all at once. We are being held in God's all-encompassing embrace and from there we see how God has come into the world while at the same time seeing how God is still coming into the world. In that embrace, what may once have been forgotten, is remembered. Where we could only see what is lacking, we now see all that is present. Where we once felt despair, we feel confidence and hope. As God gently lowers us back to earth, our feet are guided in the way of peace – peace for ourselves and peace for the world.

I conclude by returning to the arms of my grandfather's embrace. Today, I still feel that embrace as if transported out of time. I don't remember much, but I do remember the feeling of being secure. Oh, my arm was still broken. And I still went two years without my two front teeth. I didn't know about only wanting

my two front teeth for Christmas at the time, but it sure was good to be able to eat corn on the cob again. I only knew that in my grandfather's arms I would be ok. And I was. And so much more, by the grace of God.

If things are feeling a little rough this Advent, can we remember an embrace of the past and imagine being in God's all-encompassing embrace. From there, let us dare to imagine that things will not only be ok, but that God will open a new future for us. That as we rebuild from fires and floods that we will also take steps to address climate change. That as we come to terms with the growing polarization in our world, we may come to the realization that the only way for us to be safe and at peace is for everyone to be safe and at peace. From within the arms of God's embrace, may we just dare to imagine these things to be so. May the light of God shine into dark corners to bring lasting peace. Amen.

The song Annie has chosen as the Hymn of Response not only offers words that address my longing this Advent, musically it also touches my soul enabling me to believe that it will INDEED be so. "Longing for Light." On the screen.

**Benediction:**

Sometimes words cannot convey something as well as actions or touch can. Close the service by passing the peace of Christ to one another—maybe that is an embrace, a smile, or simply the words "The peace of Christ be with you. The peace of God embrace you. Go in peace"