

Peace: Light to Those Who Sit in Darkness

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

December 4, 2022, Second Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Peace

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Welcome: Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Peace. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and also welcome to those of you online.

I grew up in the church of the eternally cheerful Christian. I don't remember sermons on "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

How can you feel true comfort and peace in a church where it is considered unfaithful to be struggling? Comfort has to extend to the whole truth of our lives. If we do not learn to find solace in the midst of struggle, no peace can last.

The culture of this church is to share our truth, trusting it will be met with compassion and love. Deacon Gretchen Hannon was our teacher and model in this. Peace comes in our solidarity as a congregation that struggles and emerges with hard earned gifts of wisdom. Comfort comes from the light that shines in the darkness that we find here with the help of those who walk this path with us.

Please linger after the service to give and receive this light, and savor the comfort and peace of this loving community, both in person and on zoom, and go out of your way to extend yourself especially to those you do not know well and those you know are struggling.

Call to Worship—An Anglican priest wrote, "As darkness lengthens...we begin to see the signs of the season...Christmas music blasting everywhere, the heightened pace of holiday hustle and bustle...But inside many church buildings, this time of year looks different.... There's a slowing down, a silent stillness. The music turns to minor keys and becomes contemplative, even mournful.... In this small space, Christmas season has not yet begun. The church waits in Advent. Christmas is a celebration...that light has come into darkness... But Advent bids us first to pause and to look, with complete honesty, at that darkness. To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right."

What the writer does not say is that sometimes within that Advent ache of waiting for the light we find understanding and acceptance, we find a candle or a star, shining in the darkness. We find peace. Let us worship together.

Call to Confession – The legends of the Holy Grail tell how Percival, the knight of the round table, met the Fisher King on his travels. The king had a wound that would not heal, and Percival thought it good manners not to mention the king's pain. Later he discovered that the king was under an evil spell that would be lifted only when a knight showed compassion and asked what was troubling him. Almost a thousand years ago the wise knew that acknowledging pain and meeting it with compassion could work miracles of healing and peace. For our prayer of confession, I invite you to name what is troubling you in life right now, personally or in the world, and tell the God of infinite compassion how it feels... Let us pray in silence...

Assurance of Pardon – When we turn to God or one another with our troubles, when we face them and name them and confess the truth of how we feel, we can find the pain eased, we can find comfort and peace increased, we can find evidence of the mercy and grace of a loving Spirit flowing within and around us. May it be so for you.

Advent Candle Lighting II

Here is one of the great sayings about peace:

No peace in the world without peace in the nation.
No peace in the nation without peace in the town.
No peace in the town without peace in the home.
No peace in the home without peace in the heart.

That saying is from long ago in China in the religion of Taoism. People of all times and places have longed for peace in the heart and home and world. On this Sunday of Advent we celebrate that the way of Jesus Christ is a way that leads to peace. The way of Christ leads to peace in the heart by bringing us forgiveness, teaching us to trust and connecting us to the Spirit. The way of Christ leads to peace in the home and world by helping us to be compassionate and kind, and to accept and include all people, and to treat the earth with reverence and respect.

Long before Jesus, the people of Israel yearned for peace. The prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when God would send someone to lead the people there. Here is what he says:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever.”

Jesus Christ is known by many names. One of them is The Prince of Peace. He is also called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” And he is called the light of the world. We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ’s light into the world. With Christ’s advent comes peace, a peace we can find in our hearts and then share with the world. It is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome.

We do this giving thanks to God for the gift of peace. A saint once said, “Have peace in yourself and thousands will find salvation around you.” This Advent let us seek to have peace in our heart and resolve to work for peace in the world. There can be no peace without the things that make for peace, so let us seek to bring healing to the sick, food to the hungry, restorative justice to the victims of violence, and inclusion of all people and all the earth in our love and care, that they too may have peace.

Prayer brings peace, so let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

Peace: Light to Those Who Sit in Darkness

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was struck dumb by his doubt and fear when the archangel Gabriel appeared to him in the inner sanctum of the temple. He could not speak his feelings as he watched his post-menopausal, childless wife swell with the new, Spirit-filled life gestating within her, so we cannot know at what point he got past his hesitation to accept the miracle.

Only at the completion of the angel’s instructions did his muteness lift, naming the newborn John. By then he was ready to risk his reputation as an establishment priest by declaring that his son would prepare the way in the wilderness of a decadent, violent, greed-dominated world for an even greater miracle to happen.

Zechariah began his song of praise by proclaiming that humanity’s redemption had arrived, even though John was only eight days old and Jesus was not yet born. He ended with the

beautiful 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 darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

How did Zechariah move to that vision and faith from the doubt and fear he felt when the angel first told him that his hopes and prayers would be fulfilled?

That is an important question for us, because in many ways we are like Zechariah. We are part of a spiritual tradition that tells us stories of angels and miracles, but rarely if ever do we experience them ourselves, and if we should dare to believe that we have experienced them, doubt and fear can shut our mouths about them. We may glimpse a vision of the world we long for, we may know exactly what the realm of God’s love on earth would look like, but we remain mute about it, working for what we consider more realistic goals.

Followers of Christ’s way were strictly nonviolent for the first three hundred years of the church. You could not be both a church member and a soldier. That suddenly changed when the entire Roman Empire including its army became Christian.

Over time a compromise evolved between the pure teachings of Jesus and the corrupt violence of empire, called the Just War Theory. Today even that compromise is impossible to meet because modern weapons inevitably kill large numbers of noncombatants both directly and indirectly, and create disproportionate, indiscriminate suffering not only among innocent people, but through entire ecosystems. Nothing is worse for the climate crisis than a modern war.

I led a discussion about the Just War Theory here in the Parish Hall after September 11, 2001 when the Bush Administration was building toward war. At the end of it Bill Coffin walked me to the door and said he had always aimed for limited, practical goals to make war a little less horrific. He said that after the discussion he was thinking that he should not let his doubt of success keep him from speaking the absolute truth, that war is unjustifiably evil and must be abolished, and nonviolence return as the universally acknowledged way of Christ.

If the angel Gabriel stood before us today with the good news that the Spirit of the universe was about to evolve global consciousness to the level of Jesus and bring oneness and peace on earth, how would we respond?

It would be natural to be afraid to hope for so much, it would be natural to doubt. We might lose our voice while the message gestated within us and not dare to talk about it, but after

the past year of hearing you reflect deeply each week, I think this congregation would emerge like Zechariah, proclaiming the miracle that the dawn from on high is giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and even now guiding the feet of our world into the way of peace.

Zechariah could believe in the power of that Spirit because he had seen it at work in his own heart and his wife's belly. We can believe in it because we have seen the Spirit at work in our tiny church. The Spirit led us to say in our Future Directions Vision statement, "We intend to be a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God's creation."

We have been led by our Fulfilling Our Vision committee over the five years since our congregation unanimously adopted that statement. The Fulfilling Our Vision committee hosted a Strafford-wide study of the climate crisis from a spiritual perspective and helped establish a Strafford climate group. We helped organize what may be the largest demonstration in the history of Strafford as part of one of the largest in the history of the world.

The Fulfilling Our Vision committee led a congregational conversation in 2020 about anti-racism and taking a stand as officially open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions. Based on the consensus among us the committee has promoted actions against racism in Strafford, and is designing an education and discussion series on the important, controversial issues that could lead to our taking a stand as Open and Affirming. Annual Meeting also put a new item on the Committee's agenda, which is creating a reparations fund for Native Americans whose traditional territory we inhabit.

Our tiny congregation is doing an extraordinary amount "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." And yet the story of Zechariah makes me wonder if we are still held back by doubt and a fearful feeling of powerlessness in the face of the massive forces against us. Is our voice muted, are we unable to say what we really long for, what our greatest visions and hopes are for the transformation of the world? Are we afraid to proclaim an ideal that seems impossible, that would take a miracle of evolution by the Spirit of the universe to make real? Are we holding up only one small candle when what the Spirit needs us to be is a glorious burning star?

Advent calls us to ask such questions. We sing in an Advent carol,

Watchman, tell us of the night,
What its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height,
See that glory-beaming star.
Watchman, does its beauteous ray
Aught of joy or hope foretell?
Traveler, yes; it brings the day,
Promised day of Israel....

The hymn goes on to say that the star promises blessedness and light, peace and truth, and an end to our doubt and fear in the dark.

Let us go into the darkness now and face its truth, and open to the light that shines in the darkness. Let us sit with the truth of our feelings, being honest with ourselves and the Spirit, and being open to letting the Spirit lead us beyond where we are now.

Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Dawn is bringing the trees
to life again. No leaves,
but their roots go deep.