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Weekend of Sunday, December 8, 2018
2nd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 1:68-79
Sermon Title: "Hope for God's Peace"

Theme

In the midst of a lack of peace in Judea, the Priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth conceive a son who will be "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," John the Baptizer.

Text

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Sermon

This season of Advent we will be guided by the theme of Hope, and more specifically, this week we will focus on the "Hope for God's Peace"

And I want to begin by just putting it out there, "Hope for God's Peace" would have been ironic in the First Century, because there was no peace. And it wouldn't be difficult today to find many who think the times we live in are equally void of peace.

You will recall that at the time of the Nativity, Judea was an occupied nation. The Romans had been in power since 63 BCE, but before the Romans it was just another nation. In fact, God's people had not been autonomous since 721 BCE, so for over seven hundred years, they had not known peace. But God had a plan to save the world, and to bring peace, but not peace as we often understand it, as the lack of conflict, but peace as God sees peace.

Chronologically, the First Reading is the oldest reading. Malachi ministered to the Israelites on behalf of God in the late Fifth Century BCE in what is known as the Post-Exilic Period. You see, in 598 BCE, the Israelites were taken over by their most evil occupying nation, the Babylonians. The Babylonians were the most evil because their idea for controlling a conquered people and its land was to occupy the land by moving Babylonians into the newly conquered land and scattering the conquered people throughout the territories they held. This removal of the Israelites from Judah is called the Exile. The scattering of the Israelites is called the Diaspora, but both terms refer to the same event in Israelite history.

The effect was that 1) it left no large group of the occupied people anywhere to coalesce into a revolt, and 2) by scattering the conquered people all over the territories they held, the occupied people would lose their unique identity and also their religion and customs, in the hope that all conquered people would simply become Babylonians over time.

And that plan might have worked beautifully except for one thing; the Babylonians got conquered by the Persians sixty years later in 538 BCE and the Persians had an entirely different idea for control. The Persians under the leadership of King Cyrus, knew that the best way to retain control was to keep the occupied people as happy

and content as was possible, and so when the Persians took over, they allowed the Israelites to return home and rebuild their cities and restore their religion and customs. When the Post-Exilic Israelites, then known as the Jews because most of them that survived were from the tribe of Judah, returned, they began to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

And the reason that little history lesson was necessary is because it is into that historic scenario that Malachi brought a message to the Jews on behalf of God.

A closer look at the First Reading from Malachi reveals a dichotomy; Malachi's prophecy is both a word of hope - God was sending the people a messenger; but also a word of warning - that messenger's message was that God's people need to purify themselves.

The metaphor of the refinement of gold and silver was used, and I think it works because it is through the refinement process that rare metals are heated up until molten so that the impurities are raised to the surface where they can be skimmed off. Then and only then can the real beauty and value of gold and silver develop.

Malachi said that this was what was needed for the people of God. Does that sound like a message of "Hope for God's Peace?" We will come back to that question.

Moving on to the Second Reading, we have a reading from the first chapter of Luke. What? How can the Second Reading be from Luke? You are so smart! I did that. That reading is actually the psalm prescribed for the day but I made it the Second Reading. I don't know how a reading from Luke can be a psalm. I didn't do that.

This reading is called the Benedictus, and is the song of joy that spontaneously flowed from the mouth of the priest Zechariah, who though he and his wife were very old and childless (seen as a curse in those days) were told by the archangel Gabriel that they would conceive and give birth to a child. But not just any child, a special child, with special responsibilities. He was to be called John, and would be the forerunner of the LORD's Messiah.

Zechariah got it right in this little hymn. The first eight verses are about the coming Messiah, but beginning with verse 76, he began to sing about his own child.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

And so, at least in this passage the word "peace" actually appears, though, at this time, the Jews are still an occupied people, their overlord being the Romans.

Zechariah seemed to see that there was some "Hope for God's Peace" in the near future, and he was delighted that it would involve his son, John.

Let's jump ahead some thirty years to the Gospel Reading. In the Gospel Reading John, that son and gift of God to Zechariah and Elizabeth has grown up. And in his growing up, John fulfilled the prophecy of the archangel Gabriel by growing ever more eccentric. We'll talk a little more about John and his message next week, but this week's Gospel Reading seems to be lacking in peace.

In the first two verses, Luke set the stage in time for what followed. Then beginning with verse three, Luke wrote the story of John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who would become known as "the Baptizer." And that is fitting because his message was that Messiah was coming, and all people needed to be ready. "Ready," for John, was defined by repentance for the forgiveness of sins and a ritual washing away of those sins called baptism.

Luke also ascribed a prophecy from Isaiah to John's ministry that brought additional clarity to the message. Just as the Romans had a detail that went ahead of the king to prepare the royal highways for the king's passage, so too ought all of God's faithful people, prepare the way to their hearts so that they could receive God's Messiah, and therefore God's salvation.

But as you know, John and Jesus were born in Judea under Roman control – that didn't change for the rest of their lives.

You also know that the story of Epiphany, the visitation of the magi to the Holy Family, fueled the paranoia of Herod, who then had all the children of Judea, who were two years or younger killed.

Jump ahead again some thirty years and John the Baptizer was killed by beheading, and a few years later, Jesus Christ was killed by crucifixion.

So the real question of the day is, "How does these stories give us any sense of "Hope for God's Peace?" I am so glad you asked.

That question is a natural question for us to ponder, but it a question born entirely out of our human experience.

These stories are indeed stories of "Hope for God's Peace," but like everything in the Christianity, faith is required.

No, there was no peace throughout most of Israel's history, and I think the same could be said for most of human history. But that lack of peace has always been brought on by humankind's lack of faith in the promises of God, and a lack of ability to see things from God's perspective through the eyes of faith.

Yes, even today, there are

- Wars between nations and peoples;
- Wars between political parties and opponents;
- There is the war on drugs and addiction to them;
- and the war between drug cartels and those who oppose them;
- the war on poverty and hunger;
- there are those who suffer from a broken heart over the loss of a loved one;
- there are those who wonder how they will provide for their families after Lordstown closes;
- there are those in Texas who are once again experiencing flooding;
- and those in California with no home to go to, and no homes to be found;
- and wars between cultures, and ethnic groups, and people who identify differently than we do.

If it were not for faith in the Gospel story, it looks hopeless and peaceless. But with faith, we trust that the one who died a violent death so that we can live eternally, offers us peace now, yes now, because we know the outcome of all our life's situations are already blessed by the open gate to eternal life.

It is human to worry about today. But God revealed in Jesus Christ already has our eternity worked out. And that is where our hope for God's peace can be found

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

And so, my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for us this week is this, let us do as John preached and shed the clutter of our worldly lives so that the pathways to our hearts are clear and easy, so that we might be found by our Lord Jesus. He promised to return for us. Will it be this year? I don't know. I just want all of us to be ready and full of hope for God's peace.

Prayer

Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming give to all the people of the world knowledge of your salvation and hope for true peace that you alone can give; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen