

A Peaceful Wonder (or, of Dragons and Cows)

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

2nd Sunday of Advent - December 5, 2021

Texts: Malachi 3:1-3, Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-6, Luke 3:1-6

SCRIPTURE IN WORD AND SONG from Malachi 3 and Handel's Messiah

Sometimes what we dread is ultimately what heals us, and delights us.

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.

RESPONSIVE READING Luke 1:68-79

This is the prophecy of the priest Zechariah, spoken on the birth of his son, the one who would be Jesus' herald: John the Baptist.

Blessed be the God of Israel, who has favored and redeemed us,
Raising up a mighty savior for us in the house of David,
as spoken through the mouth of the holy prophets from of old,
to save us from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

**The Faithful One has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
remembering the holy covenant and oath sworn to Abraham,
to grant us that we, rescued from our enemies, might live without fear,
in holiness and righteousness all our days.**

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
to go before the Savior to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sin.

**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 the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

SCRIPTURE READING Philippians 1:3-6

How often are you exasperated by a project you began but can't seem to finish? God's work takes time, but its outcome is certain. Peace is one such endeavor!

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ...And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

GOSPEL READING

Luke 3:1-6

Each of the four gospel writers tells the story of Jesus' life in their own way. Luke is particularly careful to place it at a distinct moment in history, while tying it to Israel's prophetic past.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Perceptive readers will have noted that this Peaceful Wonder Advent sermon has a subtitle: On Dragons and Cows. You may wonder what dragons and cows have to do with peace, with Advent, or even with each other - other than that dragons, as we know, eat cows. This does not happen today. What does happen, you will learn.

But in fact we begin in a hot summer long ago in my callow youth, when my friends and I played music far into the night. With no ill intent whatsoever, we played far longer than is generally acceptable, especially in an apartment on a hot summer evening with all the windows open. It wasn't until the landlady came banging at the door that we realized we'd been disturbing the peace. "Sorry, sorry!" we all cried, penitently. "Being sorry's not enough!" she yelled at us.

If penitence is not enough, then what is? Maybe re-penitence, or, as we say, repentance. Being penitent *again* somehow involves more: a deeper change. Making peace means more than stopping the noise. It means change, deep change. We tried. I can't say we always succeeded.

Consider the changes the Bible promises are coming, and how hearts and minds are changed.



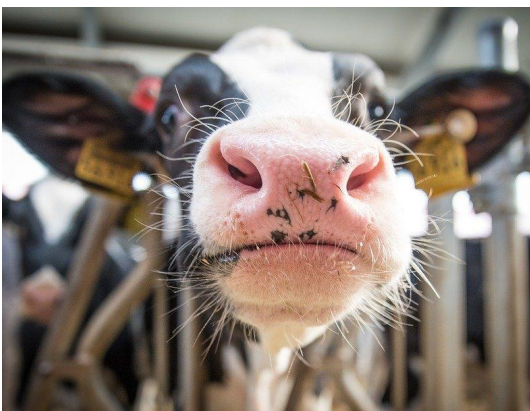
Consider the words from Malachi, and from the Messiah ("And Who Shall Abide the Day of His Coming?"): have you ever wondered about how the messenger we're waiting for is also the one who comes with these scary threats, namely burning (like the refiner's fire) and bleaching (like the fuller's soap)? Those things hurt; in fact, they hurt so much they need to be done *to* us, like surgery, because we'd never have the courage or the willpower to do them to ourselves. We'd pass out from the shock and pain.

If you've read the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis, you may remember awful cousin Eustace. What happened to him was what we all secretly dread: his insides started showing on the

outside. His own nasty, greedy thoughts turned him into a dragon. I can identify with that. Sometimes I feel like spitting fire myself. Sometimes we think we're concealing our warlike thoughts, and then the ugliness shows up on the outside. When Eustace saw his insides turned outside into a dragon, he didn't just feel sorry or penitent; he realized he wanted to change. But by himself he couldn't turn himself back into a boy. He tried to use his own claws to pull off his tough dragon hide, but he just couldn't dig deep enough. Then the lion Aslan, the Christ-figure, took over. Aslan dug in with *his* great claws and stripped him like a peeled stick. You can bet it hurt, too, like the purifying fire. Afterward Aslan invited Eustace to wash in a pool and the pain disappeared. As in baptism; he wasn't a new person yet, but he *began* to be a new person. He still had relapses. Don't we all?

This is why Paul's promise to the Philippians is so encouraging: "The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." Our goal for today is progress, not spiritual perfection.

Which brings us to Luke, and the fire-breathing prophet John the Baptist. John preached a baptism of repentance, and had no trouble naming the sins and the sinners. Sometimes I think Jesus gained a lot simply by contrast: where John is fierce, Jesus is gentle; John scolds, Jesus loves. John afflicts the comfortable; Jesus comforts the afflicted. But John had to come first, to prepare the way. And the prediction made by his father stands: "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; to go before, to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth," so that when the Savior comes, "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The rough places in us need smoothing, so that Christ can guide our souls, our selves, into new ways of being. We need to be guided into goodness, we need to be loved into loving, we need to be trained for peace. We aren't instantly perfect; but the good work has begun. It begins within us.



I told you about my grandfather and his wonder word, purpaleanie. Well, my grandmother had her own kind of magic. My uncle wrote of the heifer Paulina, who strenuously objected to being milked by the little boy he was then. (A heifer, by the way, is a young and inexperienced cow.) She kicked and kicked until, in frustration, he whacked her back. His mother showed up just in time to avert disaster. She said, "O, Sietze, Sietze, God's blessing can never rest on such temper." Then, he wrote, as though to my grandma, "You went to the heifer's

head, served her an extra portion of corn meal, and talked to her woman-to-woman: 'You need to be quiet inside, Paulina, in order to be quiet outside.' And Paulina stood perfectly still...still, too, while I finished milking her." We all need peace inside before we can be peaceful outside. To stop kicking is not enough; we need to start actively making something positive. Like milk

We can, neuroscientists now tell us, change our minds: not just our opinions, which are sort of the transparent outside wrapper over our troubled insides. Who we are can change; our way of being in the world can improve. It's not enough to be *right*; God makes us *righteous*, and that's a process. The Old Testament Hebrew word for repentance is: "Shuv." It simply means "to turn." Turning takes time. The New Testament Greek word is just as lovely: "Metanoia," to change your mind. To change, to become human from the inside out, to be quiet on the inside, to look out from your soul with eyes of concern and compassion; to think with the mind of Christ:

For repentance is more than saying "sorry;" it involves actively seeking good for others;
Just as health is more than the absence of disease; it's flourishing, *well-being*.

Just as love is more than the absence of hate; it's desiring the happiness of the beloved.

Just as peace is more than the absence of conflict; it's blessing and being blessed.

I asked some of you what gives you peace: your answers told me a lot about the beauty of your inner selves: Peace comes in acceptance and patience, in finding safe haven with friends and family, taking comfort in daily routines and activities, and in the beauty of changing seasons; peace arrives by diving deep within through meditation and prayer. In all these places and all these turnings, God transforms, refines, and purifies us in ways we can't accomplish on our own.

We have so many choices to make every day: choices that can bring peace not only to our own selves, but our families, our communities, our world - or disturb the peace and destroy the common good. And yet it all comes down to one thing that you can't really choose at all, which is God's love. God loves you whether you choose that love or not. Then it's simply letting go and letting God: letting God refine you, no matter how much it burns; letting Jesus heal you, no matter how tightly you cling to your brokenness; letting the Spirit shine a light inside your hearts to guide your feet on the path of peace. It is a miracle: So "Comfort, comfort now my people. Speak of peace: thus says our God." Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

In our lives, Lord, be glorified. May we gladly turn to you so that we may seek not just absence of disease, but well-being; not just the absence of hate, but the activity of love; not just the absence of conflict, but the movement toward blessing for all. As we make our daily choices, O God, lead us to those that keep our feet on the path of peace.

May all people everywhere choose the life that minimizes the spread of covid and makes the most of our children's return to school. May parents and teachers guide children to choices that do not harm others, but benefit them. Meanwhile, we pray with compassion for all those impacted by the school shooting in Michigan.

In this waiting time before Christmas, help us in the midst of busy-ness to find some quiet for rest and togetherness. May we also recognize and honor the faith and practice of others, and seek to share what makes for peace for them. We hold in our hearts all who suffer from illness, or the distress of a loved one. Extend your wings of protection over all those who travel. Comfort those who mourn and lead us in the way of your love, as we trust in you. Amen