



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

“Finding our way home: the path of peace”

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Two weeks ago, Treena and I accidentally found ourselves in Seattle on what was purported to be the biggest shopping weekend of the year- the black Friday weekend. We planned this little get-away before we realized which weekend it was down there and once booked, there was little we could do about it. So we went anyway, and frankly, as long as we stayed out of the malls, which is no sacrifice for me, we were just fine. We stayed in downtown Seattle, so we were able to park the car and simply walk everywhere. It was lovely.

And one lovely part of that kind of weekend is that I slow down, slow enough to notice the people and my surroundings. I love people watching. In the center of Seattle there is an intersection, very festive this time of year, filled with people. And what I found just so entertaining, was the shouting, everybody peddling peace of one kind or another. On the one corner you had a small group of big fit guys yelling that Jesus wants you to give your life to him- offering eternal peace, in heaven someday. Then on another corner you had a fairly large and organized group of people, mostly older and looking kind of crunchy granola, yelling that Israel needs to stop blockading Gaza and occupying Palestinian territory, pedaling peace through political action. On another corner, if you dared to look him in the eye, a charming young man with a clip board and a big smile that said, I know you! We are long lost friends! He would come up to you and offer you, well, more than offer, kind of a friendly assault actually, but he was selling peace for an adopted child in some third world country if only I would hand over my credit card so that a monthly amount could be charged to it automatically. Peace and I wouldn't even be the wiser. And the one that actually made me stop and have a real conversation was the couple on the other corner who had great big posters on sticks, posters of Barak Obama with a Hitler mustache painted on and the words Impeach Obama written above. I couldn't believe it. Impeach him! You just elected him. What could he possibly have done in the intervening 21/2 weeks to warrant that? Well I'm not going to get into the intricacies of their argument but suffice it to say that they were advocating peace by protecting the American constitution.

Peace. Everybody shouting peace in one way or another. The candle for this week is peace. I scan the horizon for signs that the world is getting any more peaceful and I search for the secrets that unlock the possibility of peace in Syria, or Gaza, or in Canada, or in my own community, or in my own heart, and the complete alchemy of peace has yet to reveal itself to me. Have you got it figured out?

Celebrated Asian Theologian C.S Song once wrote, “The universe yields bits and pieces of its secrets to the wisest among us who succeed in cracking some of its codes and deciphering its signals.” And the task we have today as we prepare for the coming celebration of Emmanuel, God with us, is to keep our eyes peeled for signs of this mysterious peace that continues to confound, and perhaps to crack the code within the universe that might lead us to a peace that we long for. Song would say, “Folks, all the bits of the puzzle of peace are here, in the universe. The code is available. The solution is before us. God has given us the tools, within the heart, within the mind, within the soul, and within the ancient traditions and writings.” So let's take a look at the scripture and see if we can crack the code there.

Were we alive and there for John the Baptists message, I think it would not have taken much deciphering. “Repent, change your ways, turn around and get ready, for God’s going to set the world on fire.” Not much subtlety there. Peace comes when God finally turns the world upside down.

But for Malachi, speaking about 500 years earlier, the message was far more subtle. You see Malachi lived in Palestine in a time of rebuilding, about 100 years after the exile. Things were stabilizing, crops were good, so Malachi’s message is different than any other prophet. He is not telling them that their nation is going to hell in a handbag. It wasn’t. However, in the midst of relative prosperity and calm, their sense of closeness to God was wilting. They had become quite self-absorbed. And things were not good for everyone. Widows, orphans, strangers in the land were left to fend for themselves. The sense of moral responsibility had faded. Malachi calls them on it: “you oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, the alien in your land.” Unlike the other prophets like John, Malachi is not predicting overthrow or revolution, but trying to nudge a comfortable, complacent people back into the ways of justice and compassion, and love.

Any of this sound familiar? John is fomenting revolution and Malachi is nudging. Both trying to crack the code in their own time that peace might be released, not just a surface peace, but a peace rooted in right relation. And I wonder what is required in our time to crack the code and bring about the peace that our hearts long for. Globally, personally, bridging the gap between the world as it is, and the world as God would have it be, reconciling the world to God’s self and God’s intentions, finding our way home to a peace that is real and rooted in justice.

Does anyone know the things that make for peace? I sure thought I knew back in the 80s when we were agitating for an end to nuclear madness. The menace was clear. A revolution was necessary. It was easy to crack the code. But you know, I remember watching on TV as the Berlin wall came down. I remember wondering, “how did that happen?” I mean, at the time it was a wonder to behold. In the end, it was something of a mystery how events conspired to make for a moment of peace.

And today, in perhaps even more confusing times, it is still something of a mystery, cracking the code of peace. Even though the international tangles are about as desperate as ever in places like Syria and Afghanistan and Palestine, I think we do know something about justice and kindness, about the ways in which poverty and unrest are linked. Yet how to put it together to make peace remains a mystery. It feels a little like we’ve figured out how to make smooth one particularly rough part of the road, but making a highway for our God of peace is beyond me.

And what about peace on a more personal level? I know something about the timing of a reassuring word in the life of an uncertain young child but how that child becomes a fulsome person of peace, knowing peace in the midst of turmoil, now that is beyond me. I know something about prayer, meditation, walking, writing, all of which, in times of anxiety, can bring some relief in the pit of the stomach. But being a whole person of genuine, persistent, integrated peace, that is a code I have yet to fully crack.

All of which leads me to conclude that perhaps peace is less something we achieve, a code we ultimately master, but rather more something we prepare for, and having prepared, is ultimately a mysterious gift we receive in the fullness of time. Perhaps it is more like birds coming to the feeder in winter. You don’t make them come. You don’t determine when they will come, or how many or which ones. You do however, fill the feeder faithfully, place it in a safe and accessible place, clear a way for their arrival, and then watch and wait. And when it happens, more often than not it is a surprise. More often than not it doesn’t happen when we expect. Always a gift.

Prepare the way for the peace of God which surpasses our understanding. Prepare and then wait for God to lead us home. Amen.