Reverend Jim's Sermon for December 10, 2023

Today we light the Advent Candle of Peace.

You may remember what Bishop Logan would say when he introduced the sign of peace each Sunday:

Not and easy peace
Not an insignificant peace
Not a half-hearted peace
But the peace of God in Jesus Christ be with you all.

The Peace of God, the peace that Jesus says the world cannot give, the peace that passes all understanding, is not an easy peace. We see the fragility of peace in our world, in ourselves, and of course in our families. It is one of the places that we *all* seem to experience an uneasy peace. That is certainly true for me, and it seems to be true for pretty much everyone I know.

Jesus himself was no exception to this. He seemed to live with a tension between connection to his family and his ministry to the wider world.

In one of the very few stories we have about Jesus's childhood, the Gospel of Luke tells us that when he was twelve years old, Jesus went with his family to Jerusalem, for one of the Jewish festivals. On the way home Mary and Joseph realized he was not with them, and they went back to the city to look for him. They finally found him in the temple kibbitzing with the rabbis.

Luke writes: "When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'

Jesus responded by asking: 'Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?'

Not exactly the mild and obedient child we sing about in Christmas carols.

Luke assures us that after this Jesus *was* obedient to his parents, but later we see further evidence of tension.

In Matthew's Gospel we read this story:

"While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

And most dramatic (and perhaps difficult) of all is this saying of Jesus in Luke's Gospel: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple."

I am reading a book by Gaber Mate, who some of you may know, in which he identifies a fundamental tension within all of us between our need for attachment and our need for authenticity. He says that in order to be our true selves we must separate from our family and establish our own unique identity and path in life. It appears Jesus would agree with him. So, the good news here is that *who we are* is not fully determined by who our family is. I don't know how you feel, but that is pretty good news for me. But there is further good news, and that is that we don't have to fully separate from our family in order to be our true selves.

Sometimes, some members of our family really get us, and respect us for who we are.

John the Baptist was the son of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, to whom Mary was apparently very close, because she spent three months with her when they both were pregnant. Mary with Jesus and Elizabeth with John.

John the Baptist, Jesus's second cousin, who we read about in today's Gospel, was the one who got who Jesus was.

"I baptize with water," John says, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

John was the one who understood Jesus and his mission in a unique way, and he was the one who proclaimed his coming. He was the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah who was to prepare a way for the Lord.

So, let's take a moment to consider what this phrase, Prepare the Way of the Lord, meant for Isaiah, and for John.

Isaiah was active during the time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They were away from the temple where, they believed, Yahweh dwelled. Isaiah was one of the prophets who introduced for the first time, the idea that one did not have to go physically to the temple to be in God's presence, that God was a spirit and could be with the people anywhere, even in exile. This was a new notion. When he spoke of preparing a way of the Lord, making a highway in the desert, a path through the wilderness, he was encouraging the Israelites to prepare their hearts, to prepare to receive the Spirit of God in a foreign land.

So, what was John saying when he proclaimed that we must prepare the way of the Lord. He too believed that the preparation for the Messiah's arrival meant preparing one's heart, and he was explicit that the way to do this was to first acknowledge the darkness within our hearts by admitting the ways in which we hurt others and ourselves.

Preparing the Way of the Lord was, for John, about being honest with ourselves, repenting of our wrongdoing and asking forgiveness.

The path through repentance to forgiveness is another painful path through the darkness, the darkness of looking squarely at our lives and seeing in them all the ways we fall short of being the people we want to be.

And it isn't usually because we doubt that God will forgive us that it is painful to admit when we do wrong.

More often it is our pride, our ego, our natural tendency to deny and avoid facing our own faults, and the possibility that we might have to change.

But it is nowhere clearer than in the story of John the Baptizer that the way to m freedom is honest and unflinching self-appraisal. The founder of the Jesuits, the Basque priest, Ignacious, insisted that his followers engage in a practice at the end of every day, called the Examin. This is a practice of entering into the darkness of one's own failings and repenting, recognizing the fault, asking for forgiveness and committing to change the behaviour. The Examin which Jesuits still practice to this day, is a simple 5 step process:

1. Place yourself in God's presence. Give thanks for God's great love for you.
2. Pray for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.
3. Review your day — recall specific moments and your feelings at the time.
4. Reflect on what you did, said, or thought in those instances. Were you drawing closer to God, or further away?
5. Look toward tomorrow — think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God's plan. Be specific and conclude with the "Our Father."

In the Anglican church we pray a general pray of confession every Sunday, and we open ourselves to God's forgiveness. This no doubt covers a good many bases for us, but it is not the same thing as repentance. Repentance involves feeling, not guilt, but regret, for the specific ways that we fail to love, fail to take responsibility, fail to act with kindness.

It is interesting to ponder what this notion really means of preparing the way for the Lord. Why must we prepare the way. I wonder if it refers to the gentleness of God's Spirit; that the Holy Spirit will not barge in on us uninvited. We must make the Spirit welcome.

When we repent, we make room in ourselves, we clear away the regret and guilt that clutter up our lives. We make a space for the grace of God to fill, and the more we allow God's grace into our lives the less room we have for guilt or pride or anxiety or worry or for distrust anger and strife, the more room we have for Christ's Peace. The Peace of Christ is not an uneasy

peace because it is fragile, but because we are, and we must be constant in our efforts to be peacemakers in our families and our communities.

I heard a quote on Friday by the German theologian and anti-Nazi activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

“There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security.”

The Peace of Christ comes at a cost, and the cost is our willingness to risk our sense of satisfaction in ourselves, to risk the security of believing ourselves to be right and others wrong, the risk of extending ourselves, our love, to others, not knowing whether or not it will be returned. Peace comes only after we risk entering the darkness of honest self-appraisal. And that is why the church provides us with these seasons in which we enter into a spirit of repentance, not to feel bad, but to find our way to true joy and true peace.