SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Choosing Peace”* Matthew 3:1-12

Well, here we are. It is the Second Sunday of Advent, and the prevailing theme for the day is “peace.” For the uninitiated, a Sunday dedicated to “peace” should be a Sunday morning in church filled with the gentle murmurings of invitation, the solicitous bidding of *O Come, All Ye Faithful.* Even though it is only the *Second* Sunday of Advent, I imagine many of us, our minds are already conjuring images of Mary, Joseph, and a beautiful baby lying on a bed of sweet, smelling hay, a golden, other-worldly glow pulses from his body like the gloaming of a long late summer sunset.

We breathe a sigh of pleasure and relief and allow ourselves to rest in the image and the feelings of…peace.

Well, that is what we hope for anyway, because that is what we believe we have been promised because this is the Second Sunday of Advent which is supposed to be peaceful—all of those sweet and rosy images that make us feel warm and happy. This is what we are supposed to associate with peace.

However, instead of all of that, what we get is John the Baptist, and he is anything but quiet or soothing. John shouts his message at us. He uses terms like brood that we do not know. John suggests judgement. He demands repentance from all who come to him.

Matthew tells us that John has drawn a large crowd. The people he is baptizing have come all the way from Jerusalem and Judea. They have come out of the city, out of the places of human effort and striving. The city is a place of business and busy-ness, a place of commerce, a place of distraction and diversion.

Here, out in the wilderness, there is only the quiet of nature…and, of course, John who directs, and shouts, and proclaims. We are not told what he says to the people as they wade out into the Jordan River to him. We are only told that, as they were submerged beneath the waters, they were confessing their sins. (While I cannot quite imagine the logistics of both things happening at once, I can imagine it being very dramatic, even cathartic.)

On this Sunday morning dedicated to peace, this scene from Matthew must also include the noise and bustle of the crowd. As they wait for their turn in the Jordan, the chatting would have been minimal because if they were there to confess their sins, they must have been carrying that burden in their hearts and on their minds. So, among the people still waiting to be baptized, there was probably not too much chatting or exchanging of stories or names.

However, after their baptism…can you imagine the cries of relief and release?

This is what I can imagine. The peace that those people experienced was profound, but it was not quiet. Can you imagine the shouts of joy and praise? Can you imagine all of those wet people dancing along the banks of the Jordan River?

Unfortunately, we are not told of how the newly baptized reacted or how they felt as they emerged from the water. Instead, Matthew records for us a moment of recognition John experiences as he is going about his work.

As he looks up, he sees that some Pharisees and the Sadducees have joined the crowd. He notices them because they are so out of place here in the wilderness. All of their power and influence, all of the wealth and lofty deference they are used to receiving—all of that is part of the custom and manner of the city they live in.

John does not believe for one moment that they are going to lay aside their fine robes and get themselves wet, even in the Jordan—even if they were near to the place where their ancestors crossed over into their promised land—even if they were at *that* part of the river.

No, they were not there to repent and be baptized. They have come out of the city to the Jordan River because they wanted to evaluate the situation, which was John the Baptist.

They have heard of a fiery preacher dressed like Elijah of old. They have heard that his diet is like that of the poor—locusts and whatever wild honey he could find. They have heard he has a message that is attracting many people—pulling them from the comfort of their homes, from the needful toil of their occupations, and their daily labors, out and away from everything that should matter to them.

Perhaps they have also heard that the people who come to him are returning to their lives renewed, transformed, changed. Having had whatever frightened, discouraged, or prevented them from experiencing a life filled with hope and courage, these people were returning to their lives with a new sense of purpose and dignity—and now they had no doubt of their worth.

The people who came to John the Baptist came away with a new kind of peace in their hearts and their lives. They had been asked to make a choice about how they were going to live their lives, and the kind of peace they were willing to have.

These were people who lived with at least two difficult realities. First, theirs was an occupied country. The Romans were the real power in their lives, and they ruled with an iron fist. What was most difficult was that they ruled as Gentiles—people with little regard for their history or their faith, or for the people who practiced it.

The second power in their lives were the religious officials who did not have too much regard for the hardships of the people either. Indeed, when John scolds them, he calls them a “brood of vipers.” It was the Pharisees and the Sadducees that he calls the “brood of vipers.” Presumably their prey were the people they were supposed to be serving.

So, as one theologian, Montague Williams, has written,

*“It makes sense that John is shocked and frustrated that Pharisees and Sadducees have found out about the baptism and are showing up at the Jordan. Despite their positional authority, many of them do not display the kind of life John sees fit for the kingdom of heaven. Some Pharisees pushed a heavy burden of self-sufficiency and performance on the community, while the Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection—an idea that implied the assurance of justice for the poor and excluded. Representatives of either group might be out of step with the “people from Jerusalem, throughout Judea and all around the Jordan” who enter the waters out of a need for God’s help and a desire for hope.”*

These were the serious “lay” Pharisees and the sophisticated clerical Sadducees, who disliked and discounted each other, except when they’re allied against the upstart John, (and later, Jesus).

John’s words are startling and definitely confrontational, but they are also words of truth that the Pharisee and Sadducees will ignore, but only to their peril. John would not soften the blow because he knew that too much was at stake for the people of the present, but also the future. He knew what the people wanted was a world to live in that actually valued such things as truthfulness and truth-telling, leaders that cared for the well-being of the people—all people—which included listening to one another, finding out and practicing those things that can best build the beloved community among all peoples.

This is not too different from the life we want today, is it? We want a world where peace is found in nature because nature is held precious and valuable, and so we treat it with care. We touch the earth lightly, we take seriously the many generations of people the earth has nurtured with its bounty and variety of food, and the fresh, clean water. And we realize that this is a sacred thing, this earth we live on. In her beauty and abundance we can see the face of God and know her deeply committed caring of humankind.

John’s words also offer an insight we should take to heart. Again from Prof. Williams:

*The lifelong work of discerning truth takes a commitment to bearing a certain kind of fruit. We find this fruit described in the Beatitudes. It is the fruit of mercy and peacemaking. It is hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. It is a pure heart. It is courage and resilience to live the Jesus way.*

*As John points to the way of Jesus, he is pointing listeners to pursue deep, world-changing communion with communities that have been disenfranchised, ignored, and forgotten. How this looks for different listeners today will depend on our social starting points and the dynamics of our neighborhoods, but the direction is clear. It is truth worth telling.*

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we are invited to dwell on what it will mean to have peace in our lives and the life of our community, and the world. The bad news is that the path to peace is often quite noisy. It is filled with moments of confrontation and requires deep commitment.

The good news is that God has fit us for the hard work of peace. God has given us baptism into life as part of the body of Christ, which is our future and our strength.

So, as we pray and give thanks for the kind of peace we are offered, let us also give thanks that we have hope and a story of peace that keeps calling to us, that keeps including more and more of us, and above all, it is a story that tells the good news we all long to hear: that Christ is our peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.