

“This Year, Give the Gift of Peace”

Luke 1:68-79

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Our attention this morning is drawn to the birth of John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. Like Jesus, his birth was filled with mystery and hope. You recall his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, were past the normal child bearing years when the angel, Gabriel, told them they were going to have a baby. The element of surprise was as evident here as it was in Jesus’ birth narrative.

Our specific text contains the blessing that Zechariah gave his son, John, after his birth. Perhaps you have heard this passage referred to as *The Benedictus*. It appears to be based upon a Jewish Psalm, for the language echoes phrases from the Old Testament. It also answers the question posed by Zechariah and Elizabeth’s neighbors, “What will this child become?”

Zechariah responds to that question by saying, “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” Luke 1:76-79.

It is the end of this blessing that captures my attention today, **“to guide our feet in the way of peace.”** Many scholars believe this is a reference to Jesus, the one for whom John prepared the way.

It is the first of fourteen references to peace in Luke’s gospel, which is not surprising since the birth narratives serve as an overture for the entire gospel. All throughout his gospel, Luke connects peace with Jesus.

At his birth, the heavenly host sang, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth **peace** to men on whom his favor rests” Luke 2:14.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus looked over the Holy City and said with tears in his eyes, “If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you **peace**, but now it is hidden from your eyes” Luke 19:42.

When Jesus appeared to the frightened disciples after his resurrection, his first words were, “**Peace** be with you” Luke 24:36.

Why was peace so important to Luke? Luke lived in a world filled with tension, turmoil, violence and war, and I am confident he longed for a day when people would build bridges of understanding and good will, not walls of suspicion and hate. His heart yearned for “peace on earth, good will toward men.”

Sound familiar? We, too, live in a world filled with strife. Sixty countries around the world are engaged in war today. Internal conflicts and long-simmering animosities plague many other countries. Every minute, two people are killed in a conflict somewhere in our world. Like Luke, our hearts also yearn for “peace on earth, good will toward men.”

I believe Luke longed for peace because he knew God did. God did not create us to fuss, fight, hurt or kill each other. Each time this occurs, it breaks God’s heart, like it would any parent whose children don’t get along. Luke knew God’s heart and sensed God’s anguish.

There is another reason Luke wrote so much about peace. He knew the difference peace could make in the lives of his readers and the world around them.

While violence brought death and destruction, Luke knew peace did just the opposite, ushering in a new and better life. Peace made it possible for everything good to grow and flourish. It was a soil rich in minerals and nutrients needed to sustain life at its best. This is what Luke wanted for each of his readers and the world in general.

Where would you most like to have peace in your life this morning? Is it your restless heart, your home or the place where you work or go to school? Is it among your family members or friends, with your neighbors or in a dangerous region of the world where frightened friends or family members live?

What can you do to promote peace and be a peacemaker? What can you do to “guide people into the way of peace” as Zechariah predicted Jesus would do?

The first thing you must do is to realize peace will not occur automatically or instantaneously. Someone must take the initiative and guide that process along, as Jesus did.

Why can’t that person be you? With God’s help, anyone who wants to be a peacemaker can be. This is not a role reserved for only a select group; the invitation is open to everyone.

Then, you must model the behavior you wish to see in others. This means there are things you will refuse to do because they could undermine the peace process. At the same

time, there are things you certainly will do because they promote peace, though they may be difficult.

Under no circumstances will you hold a grudge, seek revenge or retaliate for harm done to you. Instead, you will rise above this type of behavior and follow Jesus' advice to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

By God's grace, you must respond to another person's worst behavior with your best, as Jesus did, especially on the cross. You must absolutely refuse to get into a war of words or become violent. Always take the high road and be the mature, responsible, loving adult in the room.

I know this is not easy because it is not our natural tendency, which means we'll stumble and fall. It is, however, mandatory that we try again as we ask for forgiveness from God and those we hurt. This is the only way we will change the toxic tone and discourse around us which leads to misunderstandings, alienation, estrangement, hatred and violence.

This was what Luke meant when he wrote that we are to serve God "without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days." Jesus modeled this, and so must we.

Hatred breeds hatred; violence breeds violence. It must stop somewhere. *Why not with you today?*

Elevate your attitude. Clean up your language. Control your temper.

Learn some new words, like listening, understanding, apologizing, patience, perseverance, acceptance, tolerance, humility, kindness, gratitude, generosity, hospitality, confession, repentance and forgiveness.

Seize the opportunity to cast a new vision for your relationships, one that is based upon mutual love and trust, kindness and respect, listening and understanding, forgiveness and healing. Look at your mate, your children, your siblings, your co-workers, your neighbors and say, "I don't want to fuss and fight any more. I would like for our relationship to be..."

Then, offer new ideas for solving problems and resolving conflict. This means you may need to talk to a counselor or go on-line to learn new ways of dealing with old issues. Do it this week. What is more important?

For sure, it means you will need to ask for God's help. Turning a toxic relationship into a healthy one is hard work, often unappreciated and even ridiculed, as Jesus discovered. However, it is worth it; it is a game-changer, as Jesus revealed.

A peacemaker can be used by God to repair a marriage, change the atmosphere in a home, turn a toxic relationship into a healthy one, salvage a friendship, end long running conflicts and prevent wars.

A peacemaker can even dry God's tears and ease God's troubled heart over the behavior of His children. No wonder Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God."

This year for Christmas, give the gift of peace. Don't wait until December 25 to give it, though. Go ahead, unwrap it and begin sharing it today.

In September, 1978, President Jimmy Carter invited Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to Camp David to broker a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. For thirteen days, they talked, argued, agreed and disagreed over policy and details, although the public was unaware of what was going on because Carter ordered a news blackout. The stakes were too high, and the deliberations were too delicate for anything but the kind of privacy which would lead to frank and honest communication.

There was a lot of tension in the air, and on several occasions the talks broke down, with one or both leaders announcing he was leaving. Each time this happened, President Carter persuaded them to come back to the table and try again.

On the thirteenth day, Begin sent word to President Carter he was leaving without an agreement and began packing his bags. President Carter went to his cabin, hoping to persuade him not to give up on the negotiations. He took with him eight pictures of the three leaders. A picture was to go to each of Begin's grandchildren.

On each picture, Carter had written the grandchild's name and a personal note. When President Carter gave the pictures to Begin, he said, "I was hoping I could write on each picture that this was taken when your grandfather and I brought peace to your land."

Upon hearing this, Begin began to cry. He quit packing his bags and that day, Begin and Sadat agreed upon the terms for peace, which have held up now for thirty-four years.

Who needs you to unpack your bags and go back to the table?