

Whose Peace?

December 9, 2018

We're going to have a pop quiz today.

What do you know about Emperor Tiberius? (He was a Roman.)

How about Pontius Pilate? (You know he was a bad guy. Had something to do with Jesus' death, that's when we usually hear about him.)

How about Herod? (He was a bad guy, too.)

How about Herod's brother Philip?

Lysanias, the ruler of Abilene?

Annas and Caiaphas? (They were High Priests.)

How about John the Baptist? (He was a cousin of Jesus. He was a preacher in the wilderness. We're told that he wore camel's hair and ate honey and locusts.)

You know a lot more about the nobodies than you do about the somebodies. Thank you for proving me right about that. I would have really hated it if we got a dissertation on Tiberius or no one had known anything about John.

Our Gospel passage today sets John's ministry in the context of the political and religious rulers of his day. It's kind of tongue in cheek. It lists the important figures, tells us who is powerful, who is doing memorable things that are supposed to have an impact on the world. (And think about it – children memorize the lists of presidents; they study foreign rulers because that's where the important stuff happens.) But today's Gospel tells us that even though the history books will remember these powerful rulers, the real story is happening way out in the wilderness of this little backwater in the lives of a bunch of nobodies.

Today we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, and I think there are a couple of things that are going on here that can help us with our preparation. First, there's a sense of foreboding. By contextualizing John's and therefore Jesus' ministry within these men's reign, our author is fortelling the danger hovering over their lives. We're to see the storm clouds gathering in the distance as these men's names are being read.

But even more than foreboding, the list of tyrants and despots knocks us over the head with what Jesus and John were up against. It gives us a clear understanding of their motive for trekking out into the wilderness to inspire people into a new lifestyle, a new way of being. Under Tiberius, and Pilot, and Herod, and Lysanias, life was cruel for the vast majority of people. Though Thomas Hobbes wouldn't write Leviathan for another 16 centuries, life in first century Palestine was "nasty, brutish and short."

On this, the Sunday in which we light our "Peace" Advent candle, Rev. Anna Blaedel of the University of Iowa Wesley Foundation points out, "We do well to remember what theologian Dorothee Solle called the 'peace propaganda' of the Roman Empire. The message was rather simple: everyone play by the rules of those in power, and there would be no problems." The might of the empire would maintain peace by asserting its dominance over any threats.

Yet back in Luke 2:14, we hear Jesus promising peace not to those in power, but to the people. This would be a very different kind of peace. The peace of Christ and the peace of the empire are in direct conflict with one another.

One way the text points to this reality is by listing the worldly leaders whose policies make life even nastier, even more brutish, even shorter, and then telling us that at the same time the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

Here again, Blaedel's description of the pox Ramana.

“Everyone play by the rules of those in power, and there would be no problems.”

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I won't name all of the situations within which this is relevant today. In fact, I would challenge you to find any major news story of 2018 within which this isn't relevant. “Everyone play by the rules of those in power, and there will be no problems.”

Well, except for the poor. They're still going to have some problems.

Oh, and the sick. Yes, they're going to have some problems.

And the marginalized, the queer, those whose boxes just don't quite line up with the dominant narrative. Sorry, you're going to face a few problems.

Oh, and women. Well, really, you'll be fine. Actually you will be fine so long as you're smart enough to know your role, give birth at least once, and die before your husband. What? That's not about being smart? Well, if you don't do at least all of those things, society won't really promise that things will go all that well for you.

Oh, and if you're a person of color, even playing by the rules doesn't reliably offer peace.

People of color aren't promised peace even when they play by the rules. Being from Milwaukee, I still read the news from down there somewhat regularly. Three months ago in Wauwautosa, the nearest west suburb of Milwaukee, a police officer pulled over a woman driving home from church. Their reason for pulling her over and then walking up to her car with guns drawn, was because she was a white woman driving with a black man in her back seat, and they assumed she was being robbed. The woman and her grandson were driving home from church! Driving home from church, and he was made to get out of the backseat of his grandmother's car with his hands raised above his head, and kneel down on the side of the road. The idea that if everyone plays by the rules of those in power and then there will be no problems is no problem, so long as you're just like those in power.

On this Advent “Peace” Sunday, we prepare for the coming of Christ by reminding ourselves that Christ's peace is very, very different from the peace of the empire. The peace of the empire achieves its means by dominance and uniformity. And yet we come to Advent every year once again confronted by the spirit of God seeking to crack open the empire's peace. But of course, that comes at a cost to our current lifestyle, at a cost to our comfort and security.

Part of our spiritual work this week then, becomes challenging our notion that a disruption of what IS will be contrary to peace. Said another way, the peace of the Roman Empire was about maintaining the status quo, sustaining existing power dynamics, and the peace of Jesus is about the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit. Ask yourself this: If you were given the opportunity to rewrite the rules of life, would you rewrite them according to your principles, your values, your ethics, or would you rewrite them to make sure you win!

After John the Baptist's ministry is contextualized among the powerful of his day, Luke 3:3 tells us that he traveled the region around the Jordan River proclaiming a baptism of the forgiveness of sins. Embracing this is critical in how we prepare ourselves to be part of Christ's reign of peace rather than the peace of the empire. The first thing that John does in trying to bring about a different world, a different kind of society, is he tells his followers to look inward. Look to see how your behaviors, your biases, are part of the problem. Acknowledge and turn away. Isn't that what repenting is: acknowledging and turning away? Acknowledge and turn away from bias. Acknowledge and turn away from greed. Acknowledge and turn away from hostility and anger. Acknowledge and to turn away from jealousy, from fear, from control. And also acknowledge and turn away from believing yourself unworthy, from despair, from hopelessness. Turn away from these things, for in doing so, we are preparing the way for Christ. We are already starting to live Christ's new paradigm of peace and justice through love, not through domination.

This, my friends, this is the true preparation for Christmas. As much as we love bows, and ornaments, and trees, and presents, the acknowledging and turning away from that which is of the world and not of God is our true preparation. John tells us that the peace of Christ, the peace that will surpass all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds and is ours. It's at our fingertips. But the first step is turning away, away from the things that drain us of our character, away from the things that sap our values, and thus turning toward the mutuality, and the mercy, and the healing of God.

Friends, it is in doing this that we will, each and every one of us, in each and every one of our nobody lives, pave the road for the coming of the peace of Christ, the Prince of Peace. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6
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