

Sunday - December 13, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **A Grown Up Christmas List**

Scripture: Luke 3:1-6 *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.”*

Let’s set the context for our scripture passage this morning. It is one which is rather paradoxical. You see the passage begins with listing the names of the key political leaders of the time – as well as the top religious leaders. You’ll recognize a few names – Emperor Tiberius –who..... Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea who brought Jesus before him to judge his crimes and then said, “I wash my hands of his blood.” Herod – another ruler in Galilee and his brother Philip. Annas and Caiaphas were high priests of Judaism. So we have the rich, famous, powerful, named. These are the persons who hold the power over the entire region, both politically and religiously. However important they may have been for a few years, if it were not for their mention in the Bible, it is likely you and I would never have heard about them. Their rule, their judgments, their military campaigns, their decisions, which seemed so important at the time, have not stood the test of time. No, the word that has remained over 2,000 years, and which speaks to millions today is that spoken by a relatively unknown, bizarrely dressed, difficult to accommodate man named John, a man relatively unknown outside his own little Jewish clan with the common name of John.

John preached the word of God. In this passage John quotes the prophet Isaiah and gets the people ready for the ministry of Jesus, his cousin. Listen for the word of God for you today as you are counseled to “prepare the way of the Lord.” In this passage John speaks to us much like a surveyor telling us how the road needs to be prepared to make it ready for the King to use. That road is your heart – you and I are to prepare for the King of salvation to come in. Read Luke 3:1-6

I heard a Christmas song the other day that made me think about advent preparation for Christmas. In fact, I listened to the song on my computer – sung one time by Natalie Cole and another time by Amy Grant.... It was called My Grown-up Christmas Wish. Wish I was a singing pastor, but I’m not so I can’t sing it to you, but here are the words:

“As children we believed the grandest sight to see was something lovely wrapped beneath our tree. Well, heaven surely knows that packages and bows can never heal a hurting human soul. So here’s my lifelong wish, my grown-up Christmas list, not for myself but for a world in need. No more lives torn apart, and wars never start and time would heal the heart. Everyone would have a friend and right would always win and love would never end. This is my grown-up Christmas list.”

This is a pretty good list, don't you think? Permeating this song is a longing for peace"No more lives torn apart, and wars never start and time would heal the heart. Everyone would have a friend and right would always win and love would never end. This is my grown-up Christmas list."

I love the longing for peace in this song..... So what is your grown-up Christmas list? I'm proposing that you add peace to your list, if you haven't already and I'd like us to think a bit about peace this morning as part of our advent preparation.

Talking about peace at Christmas can be a bit of a paradox For example, we sing the carol "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..." but the peacefulness in our mind's eye isn't what greets the actual eye. Bethlehem is just 6 miles from Jerusalem.... Affluent, bustling modern Jerusalem.... The scene changes, though, as you approach Bethlehem. Affluent suburbs give way to the site of a long, high, concrete wall blocking the road. Bethlehem, you see, is in the West Bank—Palestinian territory. The Israeli government erected this wall in 2002 as a way of keeping suicide bombers from infiltrating into Israel. If you want to go to Bethlehem, you have to prepare for an ordeal. If you have a high security clearance, the US government does not want you even entering Bethlehem as a tourist. To enter the town, you must wait to go through a busy checkpoint. There are guards on the ground and in the towers, scanning the area with automatic weapons. Sometimes they come on the tour bus, looking each person in the face, looking for signs of nervousness or trouble. Outside the bus are the stark grey of the concrete wall, the razor wire, and tire-ripping barriers. And in the midst of all this military display of security is the brightly painted sign that spans the wall from nearly top to bottom by one of the guard towers. It's a sign that was put there by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and it says in English, Hebrew and Arabic, "Peace Be With You." Peace Be With You. Interesting sentiment to be painted on a wall covered by a machine gun in a tower.

To live in Bethlehem, on the other side of the wall, is to deal with unemployment as high as 60%. Those few who are fortunate enough to have a job outside the city have to stand in hours-long lines every morning and evening to be searched and herded through the checkpoint on their way to and from work. Shops are boarded up, infrastructure is crumbling, and life depends on the trickle of tourists who are allowed through the wall to quickly visit the Church of the Nativity and maybe stop at one of the few gift shops selling olive wood crafts, especially nativity sets (I bought several when I was there in January). Truth is, if the wise men tried to get to Bethlehem today they'd have to run their gifts through a metal detector. On this side of the wall, life is hard and hope is hard to come by. When we read the Christmas story and when we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," this isn't what we picture. We love the Christmas card image of a sleepy little town with open streets and gentle, rustic stables. Now, I'm not making a political statement about Bethlehem, or Israel or the Palestinians. What I've known all my life, and what I certainly learned in even greater depth in my last trip there, is that the animosities, the history, the hatred, are complex, deep-seated, and globally

inter-related, and peace is very, very hard to come by. Nonetheless, I believe it important for us to hold the hope for the peace of the Middle East high on our grown-up Christmas wish list. Maybe we can pray for the peace of Bethlehem and Jerusalem --- and Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, North Korea, and so many places where the citizens do not know peace. And perhaps our intense and constant prayers will open our minds to other ways we can be a part of peace among nations. So add to that grown-up Christmas list: Prayers for world peace.

Just as the candles of advent remind us of God dispelling the darkness with light, so too do the carols of advent and Christmas keep reminding us of peace "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth..." The warfare on the world scene is much like the warfare within ourselves and in our homes and our family relationships. We are desperate for peace within and with our loved ones

. "Silent Night, holy night, all is calm and all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace." Yet, there are many homes where little ones cannot sleep in peace because their parents are fighting like cats and dogs, shouting obscenities at each other and still other homes where they barely speak. There are homes where alcohol's demands rule, and regular family life is up-ended because of liquor. There are homes where the tension and stress is so high that ulcers, migraines, and heart attacks are the result and parents explode in anger at the least little thing a child does, or a spouse says..... Where is Christmas peace? There is a carol which says, "I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat, peace on earth good will towards men. In despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will towards men."

Advent --- this season of preparation gives us a time to reflect on the way life currently is, and how we wish it would be and how God intended it to be. This period of waiting and anticipation allows us to make some corrections in the way we're living... so that life might be more joyous and rewarding. The story of Christmas is of hope and joy and peace But it is a peace that is not negotiated like in a battle, nor is it the sentimental soft wish.... Christmas peace is the indwelling of God in our lives so that we are once again in sync with God, at one with God. THAT will bring us peace.

I hope that on our grown-up Christmas list is the wish for peace in ourselves. The way to have peace within ourselves is to welcome the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, into our hearts and lives. The only way we can be right with ourselves is to be made right by Him. There is no big test that we have to take, there are no huge mountains or challenges to overcome, there is no level of perfection we have to attain. God came in the flesh --- and still comes and waits

to be invited in. Where does peace *a/ways* begin? It begins here with me...with you. When we allow the Prince of Peace to live in us.

So in keeping with this message to encourage your making peace a part of your grown up Christmas list, let me offer this poem called "What do I want for Christmas?"