

Luke 1:68-79 To the Praise and Glory of God  
Philippians 1:3-11

The city of Philippi and the people there were known for the city's military history. On the 3rd of October, and again on the 23rd, in the year 42 B.C.E. it was the sight of a famous battle in Roman history, between the armies of Mark Antony and Octavius, who would become the first emperor; on the one side, and those of Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar, on the other. It was the Gettysburg in the great "civil" war that determined who would govern the emerging Roman Empire.

When I hear the word peace, which is the Advent theme for the day, I also think of war, even though it is possible to think of peace in opposition to other things; one can think of peace and chaos, or confusion; One can think of inner peace and the things that cause anxiety. It is understandable that war often comes to mind.

One can think of more recent wars. This is 2018, one-hundred years since the end of the bloodbath we call World War 1, the war to make the world safe for democracy, the war to end war. But as terrible as it was, it actually pales in comparison the one we call World War 2. The anniversary of the Pearl harbor attack was just this last Friday. It also pales before the war in our imagination that might someday come.

It has been awhile since that last large scale bloodbath. Frightening is the thought that it seems sometimes like the world is building towards another.

Believe it or not, most countries by far have more years of peace than war. Life is like this. There is always trouble, and every now and then the trouble works itself up into a crisis. Most of the time it is under better control. We may not have "happy ever after," but we have happy times.

But by and large, for all the changes that have taken place since Jesus, we find ourselves in the same predicament as did John the Baptist, and later Peter and James and Paul. We are on a journey towards peace, peace in our souls and in the world. And we have not arrived.

Zechariah

Zechariah, whose song has been read today, was the father of John the Baptist, who grew up to lead a movement after the tradition of the Israelite prophets; like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, perhaps mostly like Elijah; and who like his relative Jesus, ran afoul of the authorities and was executed.

Zechariah is also known because he refused to believe it when the angel came to proclaim that in her old age, his wife Elizabeth was going to conceive and bear a child. Because of his unbelief Zechariah was made

unable to speak until the child was born and he wrote on a tablet, "his name is John." After that he praised God and this text came forth.

It is a song about salvation, not so much the reality of it as the promise; not so much the final destination as the journey.

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the most high, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him; to give his 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, and to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Paul

Not all that much time had passed between the time of John and Paul, who came along all caught on fire by the good news of the gospel. He found himself in need of saying these words when he wrote to the Church in Philippi, who live in that city of the great battle,

"I am confident . . . that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the Day of Christ Jesus."

In other words a project has been started, and even though 2,000 years later we are still just at the

beginning, Paul is confident, and we can be confident, that the destination will be reached.

Paul goes on in this Philippians text to give some more words to it, "I pray that your lives may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless until the Day of Christ Jesus.

Christians have always only partially lived up to this vision. Often disagreeing with each other about "what is best." There has always been dissension, a lack of accord. There is today. Paul was writing them to ease the tension, plead for peace among them.

The Journey

2,000 years later, we are still journeying. We are still in need of forgiveness, still living in darkness, the shadow of death, and still longing for peace. It is a long journey, with many starts and stops.

The message hasn't changed in all these years because human nature hasn't changed. People are still selfish, they display greed, anger, and hate, and they still fear those who are different from themselves.

We still require a redemption that changes us so that we might love the Lord our God with all our hearts and soul and strength and mind and so that we might love

our neighbors, both friends and enemies. So that we might be at peace.

In the human world we keep the peace with armies and navies and alliances and treaties and every now and gain things fall apart.

But what we hope for and what Advent and Christmas promise is a different kind of peace, that comes from God; that rises among us from within, and defies explanation.

Advent, if we let it speak their message to us, cuts into our waiting with the newness that comes like the birth of a child. Christmas is a sweet time, and it inspires us to imagine its sentiment, “peace on earth, goodwill among people,” carrying the day.

Paul’s prayer and Zechariah’s vision call us to live our lives as if we believe that it will, with “the fruit of righteousness” that comes through Jesus Christ.

So be encouraged, and believe in the forgiveness of sin, and in the possibility that both we and our world will be changed so that words like tender mercy and rising sun and peace, words like knowledge and depth of insight and pure and blameless will yet come to describe our lives now and forever, to the glory and praise of God.

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