

No Wonder Jesus Blessed the Peacemakers!  
Luke 3:1-6

Jewish philosopher Solomon Maimon wrote in his autobiography about his lifelong anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. When he was a boy, he said, he slept under a heavy quilt, with the covers over his head. Before falling asleep, he always made certain that one ear was exposed, so that if the Messiah chose that night to come down his street, he would not miss the sound of his footsteps.

Many Christians assume that to be the kind of anticipation we mean when we talk about the Season of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Christ. That much we understand. So we leave an ear exposed, so to speak, or we occasionally give a quick glance around, in order that we might not miss anything unusual that might happen. Advent is a time of waiting, isn't it? We read about and discuss the emphases of Advent—hope, peace, joy, and love—and we “wait” for them.

Passive waiting is not the kind of preparation to which Advent calls us. Getting ready for the coming of the Christ is an active process. This morning we have lighted the Advent candle for peace and have reminded ourselves of the Prince of Peace who comes to establish peace in individual hearts and in the troubled world in which we live. How we yearn for peace! Indeed, how we yearn for all the blessings of the arrival of the Christ! These blessings do not come to us simply because we wait for them. Preparation means doing something.

The story of John the Baptist shows that clearly. Have you ever noticed that almost every year during Advent two of the lectionary passages deal with John? There's a reason for that. When John began his ministry as witness to

the coming change, he thundered, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight....All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Multitudes came to hear this rough, itinerant preacher. His message carried strong appeal. It promised hope for their confusion, freedom from their oppression, deliverance from the tyranny under which they lived, in essence, light for all the darkness in their lives. John spoke the words of Isaiah and aspirations planted centuries earlier by the great prophet seemed to be coming to pass: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Caught up in the fervor of the movement, some in the crowds around John asked, "What shall we do to bring about change?" John must have been an insightful preacher as well as a charismatic force. To ordinary people he said, "Share your food with those who are hungry. Share your clothing with those who have nothing to wear." To tax collectors, those agents of the sprawling Roman bureaucracy, he said, "Collect no more than you should," or "Do not cheat or exploit people." To the soldiers he said, "Do not take advantage of the weak; be satisfied with your wages."

Wait a minute! That's what it takes to bring change! Surely, John was going to lead a revolt against the Romans. Or, better yet, God was going to come down from heaven and force his will, driving out the oppressors and establishing peace. You don't level mountains and drive out dens of vipers by just loving and sharing and doing what is right, do you?

You will notice two major subjects in John's preaching. One is the requirement of repentance. When Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God a short time later, he sounded the same theme, "Repent, and believe in the gospel." Repentance means getting the heart ready--emptying the heart of self to receive something better, recognizing that we live in a moral universe, becoming aware that the kingdom of God is different from the kingdoms of this world.

John's other directive had to do with social involvement. His words on sharing, justice, and service indicate that what one does toward others is intrinsically related to our ability to recognize and receive the light of God.

Personal moral preparation and social involvement—these were the things John stressed. I don't think they have changed. We don't prepare for the coming of Christ by covering our heads and leaving an ear exposed. We do not prepare by retreating to some kind of Courier and Ives setting and waiting for peace to settle over our spirits. We get ready by doing something.

And there is plenty to do! You don't have to look far to see need. You can look inside and detect need within your own heart. If you wish to have "peace in your heart," you must examine yourself and let some things go. Many times we buy into the notion that we must have certain things in order to be at peace. We think we must do or achieve particular goals to be at peace. Or, sometimes we begin to accept the lie that what we believe and think makes no difference.

One of my heroes was tarnished last week. Perhaps that happened for you as well. For years Tiger Woods has been my favorite sports figure. I have admired his skills, his work ethic, and his quiet, gentlemanly style. I feel badly for him and his family in the wake of stories about infidelity. One of the things that hurts the most is the gist of so many editorialists who have said, “Well, you see, everybody does it.” You want to reply, “No, not everybody is unfaithful.” Every one of us is capable of hurting others, but not everyone does. To make peace within our hearts is to recognize our susceptibility to failure and to learn to trust God to preserve us.

Then, there is the context of human need all around us. The need for assistance with food, medical attention, shelter, and clothing—the simple necessities of life—has not been greater in my memory. If we want peace within our community, we can heed John’s message and minister to those about us.

Of course, there is the world beyond our immediate surroundings. We pray for members of our military who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the larger perspective we pray for everyone who works for world peace.

Peace is a word that strikes deep in our consciousness. We yearn for personal peace, for peace in our surroundings, and we actually hope for peace in our world. Jesus came to bring peace. But we do more than wait. We work for it. We become peacemakers.

The Jewish Talmud is composed of rabbinic writings and stories about the Law and tradition. I like the honesty and the struggle rabbis have shown through the ages as they have tried to make sense of the world. Christians, I

sometimes think, should put out as much effort instead of just accepting an easy answer to the hard questions of life.

One Talmudic story says that God created and destroyed ten worlds before this one. Each one was disappointing and different from what God had envisioned, so one by one God destroyed his creation and started again. Soon after God breathed life into the world we know today, he saw its imperfections and wearily prepared to wipe it out and try yet again. Then God had a thought: If the only way we can experience success is to be certain about how our actions will play out, we are doomed for disappointment. So God tried something new with this world we call earth. He decided to stay with it even though he did not know what would happen next. God decided to show grace and love no matter what. God seeks to have his creation bound together in peace and love. That hasn't happened yet, but God hasn't given up.

Peace? We have to work to create it. It's a tough job. Jesus knew that. That's why he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

J. William Harris  
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