

This is second Sunday of Advent – the day we celebrate Emmanuel – God with us - as the one who brings peace. But the scriptures chosen by the lectionary cycle aren't sweet or calming fire-place-cozy-with-some-hot-chocolate-peace.

All of these voices — Malachi, Isaiah, Zechariah — are speaking to people who live **under pressure**. People who know disappointment. People who long for God to act not someday, but *now*.

Our Gospel scripture today from Luke 1:68-79, Zechariah, an elderly priest who has just regained his speech, holds his newborn son John and sings a prophecy of liberation so bold it shakes the dust of empire.

Luke 1:67-79:

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sang:

⁶⁸ “Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, ⁷⁰ just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

⁷¹ He has brought salvation from our enemies
and from the power of all those who hate us.

⁷² He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted ⁷⁴ that we would be rescued

from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,
for as long as we live.

⁷⁶ You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,

to guide us on the path of peace.”

Luke's Gospel is written from the perspective of a doctor – one who has been transformed by the way of Christ and has deep compassion. Luke's Gospel insists that God's salvation is always good news.

Zechariah sings this clearly. He proclaims Salvation is not abstract. It is liberation. It is safety. It is freedom from systems and powers that crush people.

See, the God is born IN THE FLESH to and for the poor.

This means that in order to welcome Jesus, we must learn to stand where Jesus stands. And that requires refinement. It may mean theological dynamite and some heavy road working machines.

Isaiah prophesies these words to a whole people who had been exiled, oppressed, and forgotten. These words are not just poetry; God is reshaping and reordering the political, social and economic world.

*“Every valley shall be lifted up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.”*

Valleys will be lifted – filled. Valleys are where people are economically, socially and spiritually oppressed, marginalized and humiliated. Emmanuel God-with-us is God with those in the valleys. These, Isaiah proclaims, will be restored to dignity and raised to safety.

Mountains will be lowered — no more will the rich, the powerful loom ominously above those travelling on the road, block the road nor endanger or exhaust the traveler.

Uneven ground levelled — the injustices depressing people’s lives will finally be confronted. Oppressive systems will collapse, and the haughty will be humbled.

Rough places smoothed — Shame, trauma, gaslighting, abuse tell us that we are not worthy of God’s love. But God is preparing an accessible way – an ADA approved way for salvation to be accessible to those who have been held back from experiencing abundant life because they have been crippled by the rocks flung from the mountains. Even the most vulnerable will be able to walk without fear because the road is cleared of debris.

Isaiah’s vision is not cozy peace. It is **jostling, earth-shaking mountain shattering peace**. This kind of peace is WHOLENESS – Shalom. It is good news for the poor and a challenge to everyone who benefits from “that’s just the way the world works.”

Malachi’s prophesy of God with us is even more startling than Isaiah’s road-work. It is more personal. Malachi lived after the return from exile—when the people wanted peace, comfort, stability. But he speaks harshly to the religious leaders—people like me—and says:

*“Who can endure the day of his coming?
For he is like a refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap.”*

Fullers’ soap is not scented hand-soap. It is caustic lye that burns away impurities in cloth. The refiner’s fire is not a warm glow — it is the white-hot furnace that melts metal down until everything false rises to the surface.

Thinking of this doesn’t exactly fill us with the same feeling as seeing the warm glow of Christmas lights. But Malachi isn’t describing a God who wants to punish. He is describing a God who wants a people capable of living in real, healing, justice-making peace.

God’s peace requires cleansing, leveling, revealing.
It is not the peace of pretending everything is fine.
It is the peace of truth-telling.
The peace that burns away injustice.
The peace that clears a path for the kingdom.

This time before we celebrate Christ’s birth is God saying: “Bring the junk into the light. I can work with that. God wants truth. Honesty. Room. Letting go of our impurities makes room for grace. Purifying our hearts invites God’s Spirit to nest within us.

Along with Rudy Wiebe, W.O Mitchell, Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe we also studied the works of Flannery O'Connor in my English class. O'Connor wrote of people whose virtues were often just well-dressed sins and characters who needed painful grace to wake up to the truth.

In his blog post, "Flannery at 100" Jonathan Rogers writes, "Throughout O'Connor's body of work, the complacent and self-reliant are confronted with a choice: they can clutch at their own righteousness like a drowning man clutching at a cinder block, or they can let it go, admit that they have been fools, and so enter into life."¹ Likewise, O'Connor famously once said, "Grace changes us and change is painful."

Her story *Revelation*, gives us Mrs. Turpin: a respectable, church-going Southern woman. She's a pig-farmer's wife, proud, hardworking and considers herself to be proper and nice. But her entire worldview is organized around classism and racism. She ranks everyone in her mind, constantly rearranging the categories to reassure herself that she is at the top.

And here is the devastating truth: She believes her prejudice is a virtue. She thinks it is moral clarity. She thinks God agrees with her.

One day in a doctor's waiting room, while she is busy inwardly thanking Jesus that she isn't like "those people," a teenage girl named **Grace** suddenly stands up and hurls her textbook — titled *Human Development* — at Mrs. Turpin's forehead square between her eyes.

"You warthog from hell!" the girl screams.

And at that moment Mrs. Turpin is shaken. She can't shake the sense that this is a message from God — that God is breaking into her carefully constructed world and is cleaning house — and SHE is part of the mess.

It is easy to think of Mrs. Turpin as someone else. But as I stand here preaching it — I feel the burn of fullers' soap too. I know my own arrogance. My own impatience. The ways I hold up only parts of myself to God's light and hide the rest.

And the opposite tendency — dredging up old guilt, pretending that tearing myself down is humility, confusing self-hatred with repentance. That's not refinement; that's self-abuse. God's purification does not destroy us — it free's us.

God's purification burns away everything that keeps us from standing with the lowly and walking the way of peace. And sometimes that means being hit in the forehead by *Human Development* — that grace-filled recognition that we need to change. Sometimes it means doing a good self-evaluation, as Mrs. Turpin finally does while she's standing out by her pigs. She is so angry with God, offended that God would challenge her self-image.

And then — the vision. Mrs. Turpin sees a bridge stretching into heaven over a lake of fire. People are ascending in groups. But the shocking part? The people she thought were beneath her — the poor, the

¹ Rogers, Jonathan. "Flannery at 100." Web log, *The Rabbit Room* (blog). The Rabbit Room, March 25, 2025. <https://www.rabbitroom.com/post/flannery-at-100>.

“trash,” the people of colour, the misfits — are at the front of the procession. Singing. Rejoicing. Unburdened.

She and her respectable friends are at the back of a long line —humbled, shaken, stripped of their self-righteousness and, O’Connor writes, “Even their virtues were being burned away.”²

This is the kingdom of God.
This is Emmanuel — God with us.
This is the leveling of mountains.
This is the lifting of valleys.

And the good news — the gospel truth — is that this burning away is mercy. Tender mercy. Refining mercy. This is the Peace — Wholeness — Shalom that Emmanuel brings.

Zechariah sings:

*“By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine on those who sit in darkness
and guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

Tender mercy. A dawn breaking. A path of peace—cleared, leveled, refashioned by God’s own hands.

And God is the One who fills the valleys, lowers the mountains, straightens the crooked ways, and smooths the rough places. Before the Messiah can be born among us, we must become people who make room for him. Before the lowly are lifted, we must confess that we participate in the mountains that crush them. Before valleys are filled, we must acknowledge our role in digging the valleys

However, God does not refine us to shame us, but to restore us, to free us, to make us participants in the peace that lifts the valleys and lowers the mountains.

God refines us so that we can take up the work of leveling — the work of dismantling injustice, sharing generously, lifting the lowly, refusing violence, and living the Kingdom of God.

Living the Peace of Advent is finally seeing — or seeking Emmanuel — God with us — as the Saviour of the poor, the Light for the lowly, the Prince of Peace for those who have been denied peace.

This is what peace is to a disciple of Jesus. It is not JUST believing in Jesus but it is also loving who he loves, standing where he stands, walking the road he levels, and following where God’s way takes us.

² Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation,” essay, in *An Introduction to Fiction*, 9th ed. (New York, New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 443–58, <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnibpcjpcglefindmkaj/https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.uoregon.edu/dist/b/10904/files/2015/03/OConnor-Revelation-1lgh3d7.pdf>