

Sermon – Emily Toews

Peace:

Second advent is frequently referred to as “peace Sunday.” This is a Sunday where we explore what it would mean for us to experience the true peace experienced in the Kingdom of God. We often call this peace, shalom – which can be best translated as wholeness...but it’s more than that. Today I will use the words Shalom and Peace of God interchangeably.

I know that, when we think of this peace, we often imagine the Peaceable Kingdom – Where the lion and the lamb sit together, and the child puts their hand in the den of an asp, and no one is hurt or destroyed on the Holy Mountain of God.

These images of peace – where the mighty and the lowly, the predator and prey sit together give me pause. What would it take for the predator to sit with the prey and not consume it...for the prey to sit with the predator and not run away?

It would take a complete overhaul of the primal-base-the id and a complete change of action – a re - action, a re-pentence, a re-formation in EVERYONE and everything. I guess you could say that for Peace like this – all would have to be recycled.

We start with Re-Action.

Let’s begin with reaction. God acts and we respond. In Luke 1, Zechariah questions the angel when Gabriel tells him that his wife, Elizabeth will have a son – the prophet of the Most High. Zechariah is then struck dumb until after he names his newborn son, John. Suddenly, Zechariah can speak again and what is the first thing he does? Having nine months time to think and process the angel’s proclamation, Zechariah praises God and sings a song.

Zechariah’s reaction to the Holy is to sing! Yes, his first reaction to the news was doubt...that’s fine. It didn’t stop God from doing a miraculous thing. Despite the many months of frustration and inability to communicate, Zechariah’s first sound was a song!

How do we react to the holy? Do we run away? Do we ask lots of questions? Do we turn away? Do we widen our stance and take on what God is tossing at us? Like Zechariah, we may protest or even run away, but even if we initially turn away from what God is asking of us, God will always be with us – arms outstretched – waiting for us to re-turn.

The first step in shalom – the Peace of God - is to DO something. To react – either go – flee – or turn into the wind of the spirit.

Later John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah reacts to the call of God – verse 80 says that John grew in stature and became strong in spirit. Here, the word “strong” in Greek refers to determination and a stalwart will. John’s reaction to his calling, by God, was turn, face God and dig in so that he could take all that God was handing to him.

From Reaction we move to Repentance

Malachi 3 reminds us that God’s peace requires more than just a reaction. God’s requires repentance. A putting away of the former life and all that was in it. A turning away from, a cleansing of ourselves from all that was so that new life can begin.

Malachi prophesied to the priests in the temple, the Sons of Levi. They had desecrated the temple with impure sacrifices. They were corrupting the temple – and God’s people. This wearied God. The problem was clear: There needs to be a deep cleansing! So what does Malachi prophesy?

He says:

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,
and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

² But who can endure the day of his coming,
and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;

³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,

and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver,

until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem
will be pleasing to the LORD

as in the days of old and as in former years.

The prophet Malachi writes, “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

A refiner's fire is that white-hot blaze that melts ore and brings the impurities to the surface. It liquefies the metal and congeals it all together. To be refined by fire is to be melted; made molten. You can't look at it without special glasses – else you'll burn your retinas. Hot. Fluid. It reminds me of hot lava – burning and cleansing everything in its way...

And what about fuller's soap? "A fuller was someone who cleaned and thickened freshly-woven (usually woolen) cloth. The process involved cleaning, bleaching, wetting, and beating the fibers to a consistent and desirable condition. Fuller's earth was a variety of clay that was used to scour and cleanse the cloth. Fuller's soap was an alkali made from plant ashes which was also used to clean new cloth.

But Malachi wasn't prophesying to the common person – the poor farmer, beggar or even the poor craftsman. This passage is not speaking to the oppressed – the ones who have nothing and all choice is taken from them. No, Malachi and John – and even Jesus – usually pointed their comments to those in power – the Pharisees – the Sons of Levi – the Rich – the educated. The ones who could get by with being lazy...the ones who could get ahead by pushing down the weak. The ones who thought that their ability to trace their line back to Abraham meant that they would automatically be saved.

Malachi and John both said, “REPENT” turn away from that –Let it Go.

Until their hearts and their heads are in it together...until what we offer to God is pure intentions, pure integrity – pure worship and pure love shining like crystal. **Then** the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD.

And this leads me to the last of the 3 r's - Reformation

After we react and repent, God is able to re-form us – or shape us into the people who God wants us to be. Why? Because God is love, God wants us to love each other. God wants us to love each other like a mother and father love their children – knowing that we are more than we appear on the outside, loving each other regardless of our faults and sins, and willing to die for one another.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we read how God's work in shaping and molding us creates a community where the powerful sit with the lowly and don't eat them up. Where the meek seek out the vipers, instead of running away in terror. This true peace of Christ that we welcome and expect in the Kingdom of God in the now and not yet...this true peace we can only now see in glimpses...

Paul begins the letter by saying, “

Philippians 1:3-11

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

I am confident of this,
that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

We've got to go through the refiner's fire and get washed up with fullers soap so that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

We've got to decide to turn to God. We've got to go through the refiner's fire and get washed up with fullers' soap so that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

Why? So that our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Friends. God's kingdom is not yet – but it is now. Right now. It is here, at Menno, it is at your school and on your farm. It is wherever YOU are. It is wherever a child of God has reacted by turning towards God. It is wherever a child of God has repented and been cleansed from sin and it is where a Child of God is being moulded into the shape of God's choice. God's kingdom of wholeness – Shalom – God's peace is wherever this child of God sits with the fearful, comforts the anxious, sings with love, and always speaks the truth with a mind towards the wholeness of the others around them. Shalom is where God is invited to participate in all parts of life. Thanks be to God for sending Christ to teach us how to live in such a way. Amen