

Signs of Peace
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "



Today, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of peace. What do we understand is peace?

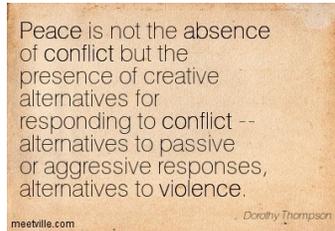


Might not be what we think – especially if we go back to biblical times and look at that notion of peace. Jesus' people lived in occupied territory – occupied by the Roman soldiers. People lived in fear. And peace for these people living where the systems were not fair, not just? Peace – under those circumstances? Needs to transcend all that, right? So - peace - It is not just the absence of armed conflict or "peaceful co-existence." Maybe more like the right relationship between people that comes from right relationship with God. Was it one of the Pope Pauls who said



"if you want peace, work for justice." Justice, however, is not just fair laws and political rights, but we're talking the justice that's an inside job - that the bible calls righteousness.

Then there's Dorothy Thompson's definition,



“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict—alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”

So what does all that mean to us?



When I think justice - racism and racist systems always come up AND – they are violent, aren't they? Physically – sometimes; emotionally, always!



A friend of mine tells this story – a mom was at a grocery store recently, and she noticed an inexpensive baby doll with a pretend bottle, and she thought for a second about buying it for her daughter. Her little girl loves baby dolls. But then, she zoomed out her focus and realized that every single doll there, with their various sizes, accessories, and price points, were white.”



And this mom made an assessment: “This store can hire a person of color to check my groceries, but they can't sell a doll that looks like her? We need to do better.”

That, my friends, is a sign of peace in the making. “Zooming out” is an active choice to see things differently, to think about things in a different light; and a whole new way of thinking might move us to peacemaking. I would like to follow up with that mom – I wonder if she herself followed up her shift in thinking? I wonder if she did anything to encourage the store to have on their shelves dolls that would look like the customer whatever their skin color, whatever their race and/or ethnicity. I wonder if the mom inspired another sign of peace?



“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict—alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.” Didn’t Jesus teach us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

Peace is the presence of creative alternatives to responding to conflict. And It all starts with an active commitment to changing our whole way of thinking so that we can quit missing the mark. When we make that commitment to change – that is definitely a sign of peace!

Signs of peace – doesn’t that sound like music to our ears? The headline too often tell us of yet another mass killing or mistaken killing or random shooting. Not unlike the circumstances into which the Christ child is born on Christmas Day. So, what are we doing to prepare the way for this love of God that is freely given to the whole world?

If we are supposed to prepare the way for Christ by repenting so that we would usher in the forgiveness of sins...how are we going to do this? How are we going to change our whole way of thinking about this ongoing cycle of gun violence that is obviously missing the mark?



I was very interested to hear about Gary Slutkin who is a former epidemiologist for the World Health Organization and the founder and executive director of Cure Violence.

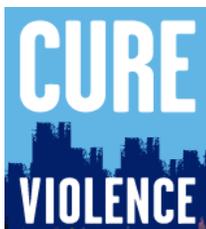


It’s his contention that we can stop the spread of violence by using methods and strategies associated with disease control, but....guess what he says? He says, “this will require a change in our whole way of thinking.”

I was intrigued! This innovative thinker suggested that violence is a contagious disease. Say what?!? Violence is a contagious disease - because it fits the characteristic signs and symptoms of a contagious disease: it causes death and disability, and it’s contagious because each instance of violence leads to more violent events. Violence begets violence.



So his organization, Cure Violence, uses outreach workers called **interrupters** to detect unusual events, to prevent them from happening, and to prevent their spread. He says, “Guns are everywhere, and because weapons are so easy to access, Cure Violence is more concerned with people, situations, and circumstances where violence grows.



Because Cure Violence lets people know that these are health workers working in everybody’s interest—people will readily give information about their friends, their family, and their community. And it’s so much more – their work and life has inspired a movie to inspire others – it’s called the interrupters – about the community workers and why they do what they do...many served time in prison for violence and how they know the world of violence needs to be changed. AND it works, folks!

Cure Violence says, “And our experience with this in U.S. cities, as well as in Latin America, Africa, and even in Southern Iraq, shows that we can get 40 and 70 percent drops in violent events by viewing and handling gun violence as a health problem that affects us all.”

Isn’t that amazing? That is definitely a sign of peace in the making!

So, instead of our communities falling on one or another side of a politically framed argument—that is, **either** we demand stricter gun control from our political leaders **or** we exercise our alleged second amendment rights with vigilance by carrying guns and responding to violence as we spot it—instead of putting ourselves in one of those 2 boxes, we could be zooming out to see this whole mess as a contagious health problem, and then actively equipping people to be health workers trained to cut violence off before it erupts in any capacity. Gary Slutkin says we could do this tomorrow—we could act on this alternative tomorrow; but it would require a change to our whole way of thinking about violence itself—to see it as a disease.

“Changing thinking and changing behavior is the bread and butter of the health sector.” He says. Hmmm, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth said that too in how they taught and demonstrated that changing thinking and changing behavior is the bread and butter of Christianity. It’s the essence of peacemaking that forgives us—all of us—from sins of violence that we commit against one another.



Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.



Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;



and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Sound familiar? Then you're probably remembering The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He paraphrased those words from the Prophet Isaiah whose words were paraphrased by John the Baptist in today's Scripture reading:

We all remember Dr. King's words, right?

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

All flesh. All of us. Every human being will see the relentlessness of God's salvation and love.



See, what Dr. King does in his "I Have a Dream Speech" by paraphrasing those words, "all flesh shall see it together," helps us zoom out and see the big picture of our communal commitment to justice.

As we repent, as we make a u-turn, as we choose alternatives from the present ways of thinking about everything from gun violence to our Muslim neighbors to undocumented immigrants living the shadows of our everyday lives to the poor and marginalized in our midst, that reorientation enables us to see—all of us together—that God's salvation and God's grace and God's relentless love for this world is for everybody; EVERY BODY!



and so we let go of indifferent ways of looking at the people and the world around us, and we start working together for justice, for healing, for peace. And we start hitting the mark of God's dream for this world, instead of missing it.

This is our good news. And from where I sit, the best part of that good news is who it comes to: The message of changing our whole way of thinking in order to let go of missing the mark comes not to Emperor Tiberius, not to Pontius Pilate, not to Herod, not to any of the high priests or rulers of that day,

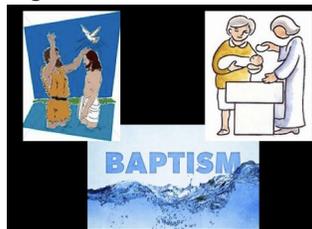


but the word of God comes to an overlooked guy on the margins named John. That's what I hear in today's message – it's saying that we will see the most unlikely of characters,



including you and me, - we – each of us - have a central role in Christ's invitation to peacemaking; each of us is a person able to commit to alternatives to violence rather than sitting idly by and hoping that God will make *our* lives peaceful while violence continues all around us.

This is the proclamation of John the Baptist. Preparing the way is zooming out and seeing salvation together, and together seeing that salvation is for all.



The image of baptism –whether the one being baptized in the river Jordan like Jesus and so many others or by a sprinkle of water...that image serves as a reminder to all of us of our commitment together to follow Jesus Christ, and to accept the joy and the cost of that discipleship.

That image of baptism reminds us that when the world tells us God only has so much love to go around that's when God finds us, fills

our cup with so much love that it overflows,
and then God invites us to a life of recognizing that that great love for all exists in our everyday world and then invites us to work together to change those systems of violence. And that image of baptism is what all flesh sees together and rejoice!



So, folks - "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make peace by committing to a whole new way of thinking so that you would let go of anything that keeps you from loving your neighbor as you love yourself, and by doing so, you are a reflection of the love that God has for us all?"

To prepare the way of the Lord is to see those the world overlooks and to listen to what they have to say.

To prepare the way of the Lord is to see those the world overlooks, including the voice of God that speaks in you.

So - What is that voice whispering to you today?

How is that voice inviting you to change your whole way of thinking?

Remember -

Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity.

- It's the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice,
- It's the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer,
- It's the act of finding a third way that is neither fight or flight but the careful, passionate pursuit of reconciliation and justice.
- Peacemaking is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free, the victims and the perpetrators free!

Let us heed God's call to BE God's sign of peace...amen!