

The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light: Searching for Shalom

Luke 1:67-79

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

December 6, 2009

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

The first chapter of Luke gives us background, not for the birth of one major New Testament figure, but of two. It is in the first chapter of Luke that we find the divine announcements of the miraculous conceptions and births of both John the Baptist, and Jesus (though the actual account of Jesus' birth is found in the second chapter). The text before us this morning is a song sung by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, on the occasion of John's naming. Nine months prior, Zechariah was tending the Holy of Holies in the Temple, when he was told by a messenger of God that he and his wife Elizabeth would soon welcome a son into the world. The only problem was, both Zechariah and Elizabeth were well along in years, and they never had been able to have children before, so the word from the messenger seemed a bit unbelievable to Zechariah.

In response to Zechariah's unbelief, the messenger told Zechariah that he (Zechariah) would not be able to speak until after the birth of the son. And so Zechariah walked out of the Temple that day, having been made mute. Shortly after that, Zechariah's wife Elizabeth discovered that she was pregnant. Now, Elizabeth was the cousin of Mary, who not much later had her own encounter with an angel of the Lord and learned of her own divine conception of the Messiah within her; the child that Elizabeth was carrying was to be the forerunner, the messenger heralding the arrival of the Messiah.

For nine months Zechariah was unable to speak a word. Then after the birth of his son, there was some confusion as to what to name the child. When the people came to Zechariah for clarification, he indicated that the son's name was to be John, and at that moment Zechariah broke out into praise of God. Zechariah's first recorded words after the birth of John the Baptist are found in this morning's lesson from the gospel according to Luke. Hear now the word of God as it is found in the first chapter, beginning to read in the 67th verse...

The song of Zechariah has come to be known as "The Benedictus", after the Latin translation of the first word, "Blessed." It is a song that has a prophetic tone to it, proclaiming the salvation of God. It is the announcement of the fulfillment of the promises made to David concerning the Messiah that would come from the lineage of David.

Then in the second part of the song Zechariah describes the role of his newborn son, John. John would be the "prophet of the Most High," the forerunner who points the people to the One who is coming after him. It is John who will call out to the people to prepare for the coming of salvation. It is John who will call for repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is John who will be the voice calling in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord;

make straight paths for him. It is John who will declare that it is in Christ that all humanity will see God's salvation.¹

And then as Zechariah ends his song, he notes that the salvation that is at hand will break upon our world like the dawn ushers in a new day, that there will be light for those who sit in darkness, light that will guide our feet into the way of peace.²

And there it is once again: light for those who find themselves in the darkness. This Advent season I am using as my point of departure the common Advent image of light shining in the darkness, in particular the light from the Advent candles we light each week. Every year during this season we quote the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; on those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death, light has shown."³ This morning's text offers us a similar promise: The One who is to come will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death..." This time the light has a specific purpose, to guide those who are in the darkness, to show the way. And the path the light illumines for us is the way of peace.

Today we lit the second candle on our Advent wreath. In many traditions the second candle represents peace. As we look ahead to Jesus' coming to inaugurate his kingdom, the hallmark of his kingdom will be peace. But the peace that we will find in the kingdom of God will be a far cry from the peace that most of us are willing to settle for in our day. The peace that we will experience in the kingdom of God will be more than a cease-fire that stops the killing but not the tensions. The peace that we will experience in the kingdom of God will be more than simply a cessation of hostility. The peace that we will experience in the kingdom of God won't be a tenuous agreement on a piece of paper.

Jesus speaks of a different kind of peace. "Peace I give to you," he says. "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid."⁴ It is a different kind of peace, a peace that can only come from the One whom we herald as the Prince of Peace. The peace that is the object of our Advent longing is a real, enduring peace manifested in a oneness among all, harmony, and a movement toward joy and well-being for every creature. It is a peace that is written not on paper, but on our hearts. The peace that is the object of our Advent longing is *shalom*.

It's been more than 20 years now since I took one of the best comprehensive overviews of the Bible there is, The Bethel Series. And because of the ways that the Bethel Series incorporates pictures into major learning themes, I still remember today the lesson about the effects of Adam and Eve's rebellion in the garden of Eden. Before the fall, there was harmony, *shalom*. But once sin had entered in, the harmony was broken. No longer was there harmony between human beings and God. No longer was there harmony between fellow human beings. No longer was there harmony between human beings and creation. The harmony was lost. *Shalom* was no longer the central reality defining any of our relationships.

It can be said that the overriding purpose of the rest of the Bible from Genesis 4 through Revelation 22 is to tell us the story of how God will restore the *shalom*, the peace that we have lost. Walter Brueggemann has noted that "The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community

¹ See how John the Baptist fulfills this role in Luke 3:1-6

² See Luke 1:79

³ Isaiah 9:2

⁴ John 14:27

with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.”⁵ It is the vision portrayed by the prophets, that the promised restoration and salvation of God’s people will result in the restoration of shalom, enduring peace and well-being.

Shalom is God’s plan for the world. One of the most frequently quoted verses from the prophet Jeremiah is the 11th verse of the 29th chapter: “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” The word “prosper” is the NIV translation of the Hebrew word, shalom. But the English translation is unfortunate, because most contemporary interpretations of prosperity focus on the material well-being. Shalom comes not from our possessions, but as a result of our relationship with God. From the beginning to the end, the story of the Bible is the story of salvation, and the result of our salvation will be peace, real enduring peace, harmony with God and with one another and with the world.

And the way of peace is through Jesus Christ, the One whose birth we remember at this time of the year, and the One whose coming in glory we await with intense desire. Scripture is clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of the shalom that is the object of our longing. At the birth of Jesus the angels break forth into song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.”⁶ The apostle Paul declares that Jesus Christ “is our peace; [Christ] has made us one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”⁷ It is Jesus who restores our peace with God. It is Jesus who restores our peace with one another. And it is even Jesus who makes us at peace with the world around us.

The vision of the second Sunday in Advent is the vision of the Bible: It is a world living in peace, shalom, with God and one another. And it is a vision that we are called to live into even now, especially now. We are called to live into the peace that is ours through Jesus Christ. Living toward the vision of shalom means engaging in the repentance that John the Baptist so ardently preaches to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. Living toward the vision of shalom means we turn away from our own selfish ambitions and vain conceits, and we turn toward God and we seek the welfare of the community. Shalom, peace, is not an individual trait; it is something that must be lived out in community, in relationship.

Shalom, peace, happens when we seek justice and righteousness for all.

Shalom, peace, happens when we lay aside covetousness and selfishness.

Shalom, peace, happens when we love one another as Christ has loved us.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin lived his last years in what should have been a very tumultuous and stormy season of his life. He faced false accusations of sexual abuse. He was diagnosed and treated for cancer, went into remission, then suffered a recurrence of his cancer which took his life. Yet in the midst of all that turmoil, Bernardin reflected that the greatest gift he received from God was the gift of peace. It was the gift of peace that enabled him to cling steadfastly to God. It was the gift of peace that enabled him to face and be reconciled to his false accuser. It was the gift of peace that enabled him to face death without fear.

The last words in his book, The Gift of Peace, are the familiar prayer of St. Francis. They are words that are appropriate for us today, as we seek the gift of peace, as we long for the shalom that Jesus Christ offers to us. As we long for the final peace that will come when Christ returns, let us now pray for the strength to live into the vision of peace that even today Christ makes possible for you and me:

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom, (New York: United Church Press, 1982), p. 15.

⁶ Luke 2:14

⁷ Ephesians 2:14

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.