

“Actions Speak Louder...”

Matthew 3: 1-12, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 12-8-2019 at PCOC

On this second Sunday of Advent we light a candle for Peace and it reminds me of the phrase: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” Sounds easy enough. Are you at peace? If not, what keeps you from being at peace?

In the Bible, peace, or “shalom” is much more than just the absence of war. Real peace, deep peace, comes first of all from within. You can have a lot of money in the bank, but still not be at peace. Depending on how you measure success, you could have a lot less than others, but still be filled with peace.

When we sing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* I think we’re supposed to feel peaceful, but Christmastime is not automatically a universal time of peace. It’s easy to compare yourself with others who seem to have more of what you’re really desiring this Christmas. What do you really want for Christmas this year?

Last week we began Advent, but you remember that the sermon was not a Bible story about the birth of Jesus. Instead, we had a passage exhorting us to be ready for the return of Christ (his 2nd Advent) when he will come suddenly, unexpectedly, as a thief in the night.

Today’s lectionary passage still doesn’t bring us to Bethlehem, but instead out into the desert, where we get a glimpse of the forerunner of Christ, the messenger God sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the Way of the Lord. Today we travel to the banks of the Jordan River [where millions of pilgrims have trod], as we hear, once again, the story of Jesus’ *cousin*, John the Baptist. Turn with me to chapter three of Matthew, at the beginning of the New Testament, and hear the word of the Lord.

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor

and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Merry Christmas. The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This event occurs about 30 years after Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Jesus has grown up, and is ready to begin *his* ministry, but first he goes out to take part in the ministry of his *cousin*, John.

Instead of packing out the malls at Xmas, imagine these same-size crowds all flocking down to the Jordan River - into the wilderness outside of Jerusalem. It’s a mob scene - “with the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region along the Jordan,” heading out there - a gate-crasher in the desert. Is it a Black Friday sale? Are there door-buster prizes? What is John’s draw? What would get you to go?

Whenever we hear this story, we’re drawn to the fact that John was a little bit *out there*. His clothes weren’t normal (a camel hair coat w a leather belt). His diet wasn’t normal (although honey-crusted locusts are *filled with protein and delicious*, I hear). His message, “Repent!” well, that wasn’t normal, either. And yet, people were turning out in droves. So does cousin Jesus.

They’re going out there to be baptized by John, and to confess their sins. In the continuation of this story, Jesus will ask to be baptized, too - (even though John states that he isn’t even worthy to carry his sandals).

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” was the message. Isaiah’s prophecy from 800 years ago is coming true! Get the roads ready, get his path ready, get *yourself* ready! The One who is more powerful than me is COMING soon! And so they came!

Into this mix of pilgrims and penitents also come some Pharisees and Sadducees, oddly enough, also wishing to be baptized. John’s not buying it, or at least it doesn’t sound like he is. ‘You brood of vipers’ is not the nicest holiday greeting one can give.

He implies that true penitence is a lot more than just appearing sorry. What God really wants from all of us, John says, is this: to bear good fruit - “⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He tells them. In other words, “live lives that bear fruit in this world, and in the world to come.” (Rick Morley)

Instead of being smug about our spiritual ancestries (like they were doing with Abraham in verse 9), John emphasizes that “what really counts is how we’re living our lives.” (Arland Hultgren)

It’s always easy to point our fingers at the pious and legalistic Pharisees and Sadducees, but we have to realize that we’re tempted to do the same thing they do. I don’t know how many people, and pastors, I’ve had mention to me over the years, “Well, I come from a five-generation family of Presbyterians” or “My ancestors built this church” or “my great-grandfather was an elder” and so forth. Those are all great things, but they don’t answer the point that John makes: Don’t just

namedrop, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Jesus will echo these words later on in Matthew when he teaches “By their fruits you shall know them.” (Prove it by your actions.)

And here is where this little word, repentance, comes in:

“Repentance, or *metanoia*, to use the Greek word, refers to far more than simply being or saying one is sorry for past sins, far more than mere regret or remorse for such sins. It refers to a turning away from the past way of life and the inauguration of a new one, in this case initialized by an act of baptism.” (Ben Witherington)

I think of people who have been in real trouble and have turned their lives around - like people who go to AA, and finally realize that they are powerless over their addiction, and get to the point where they are eager to turn their lives over to their Higher Power. They do, and God steps in, and through the System known as the 12 Steps they see their lives become transformed over time. More than just being remorseful or giving lip service, they walk the walk.

It’s like the transformation story we read about with Zacchaeus, back in November. Jesus enters his life, and is so transformed that he gives away half of his possessions and pays back those he’s wronged 4 times over. Talk about a transformation. Talk about real peace.

Every year on this second Sunday of Advent, we light a candle for Peace. It always makes me think about what being at peace is really all about. I got an ad on my phone yesterday for headphones. It said, “Find peace anywhere with these headphones.” Whoa, magic headphones! If only it were that easy.

I do think that finding peace first comes from within, but in order for that peace to get there, you have to look at your actions. You take stock of your life, and you ask yourself how you are making a difference in the world, and in the lives of others.

I thought about our passage from last week, about how to be ready for the day that Christ Returns:

- Keep short accounts with God, don’t get behind in your correspondence.
- Don’t pass up opportunities to do good to those around you.
- Consider how you are building your “spiritual resume” - do your part to grow your faith.
- Be on the lookout for “random encounters” to become “divine appointments.”
- Tell the people you love how much they mean to you
- Don’t hoard your generosity.

This week I’ll add to the list: Remember that your actions do speak louder than your words.

If you want to find real peace this Christmas, peace that comes from within, you’ll get there by having the actions to prove it. Plato wrote, “To know the truth is no

guarantee that you'll do it." The proof is in the pudding, as they say. By their fruits ye shall know them.

Maybe St. Augustine had it right when he wrote: "Pray like it all depends on God, but work like it all depends on you."

Maybe John the Baptist's words were meant for more than just First Century Palestine:

- Prepare the way of the Lord,
- Get ready for God's presence in your life.
- The kingdom of heaven is coming near - to you.
- Bear good fruit.

"Why is it that so many times in Christianity, we seem to have all the right answers but we're not helping anybody?" (Ken Olsen)

May your good deeds at Christmastime - and all the time, cause you the Peace that you're looking for. May the fact that you are God's beloved child - God's cherished and treasured child, spur you on to a life well-lived, a life that looks out for others. Amen.