

‘You are God’s beloved child.’

‘God is very pleased with you.’

With these words, we bless our children every Sunday. With these words, we gather around the table that sustains us ... in a vigil of prayer, naming those places and people and powers that rage within us and among us. That need the peace of Christ to dwell richly in our hearts. Singing for that peace to begin on earth and to begin with us. Right here. Right now, as we prepare the way of Christ’s peace together.

We are, in a very real sense on this Second Sunday of Advent, doing what Zechariah does when he blesses God for the birth of his own beloved child, in the lection from Luke that is our lesson for today.

‘You are my beloved child,’ Zechariah sings to his son, who will become John the Baptist. ‘I am very pleased with you.’ You, my beloved child, will proclaim healing and wholeness and hope for us. You, my beloved child, will shine a light upon our darkness. You, my beloved child, will guide our feet in the way of peace.’

In the Greek version of this song from Luke, though, Zechariah does not sound quite so peaceful as in the version Dan Rogers sang so beautifully for us a few moments ago. In the Greek version, Zechariah sings boldly of the coming of his child as a sign that God will ‘overthrow our enemies’ and rescue us ‘from the hand of all who hate us.’

It is, in a sense, a call to arms.

Because for Zechariah, and for all first century Jews who live in the land of the Roman Empire, the *Pax Romana* – or the ‘Roman Peace’ that is supposed to enrich human flourishing – is really about suppressing the resistance of a conquered people by military might. And co-opting their means of subsistence living for economic exploitation by a far-away king.

The Romans ironically describe their ‘peace’ as feeding the hungry, ruling the world with justice, and protecting the people from themselves. But the people know the Romans do this by commercializing the local economy for their own advantage and cultivating a dependence on Rome as the occupying power.

Zechariah – and every other first century Jew – knows the so-called *Pax Romana* only really keeps his people living in fear. And so he sings in the hope that God will liberate them from their enemies through the birth of his child.

In the fullness of his life, Zechariah’s Beloved Child does indeed turn out to be all the things his father hoped he would be at his birth. John the Baptist! The great prophet crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord!

But he does it quite differently than perhaps his father imagines.

He does it through a call *to his own people* to come to the water in a spirit of repentance. For a baptism that will prepare them to enter the coming Shalom of God’s peaceable kingdom.

Christians often read the story of John the Baptist in the Jordan as a call for *individuals* to come and change their way of life so they might live anew in the reign of God. But for John the Baptist – and for all first century Jews who live in the land of the Roman Empire – the call to repentance is about learning to live *as a people* in the peace that passes understanding. A peace that is emphatically unlike the *Pax Romana*—or ‘Roman Peace’—that governs every part of their lives.

For John the Baptist—and for all first century Jews who live in the land of the Roman Empire—the question of baptism is about how to resist this crushing of life all around them through a *Pax Romana* that is the emphatic opposite of the peaceable kingdom of God. For first century Jews living in the land of the Roman Empire, self-examination and ritual purification in water are about recruiting resistance movements much more than they are about personal piety. And so for John the Baptist, the Jordan River becomes a testing ground for sorting out the best and most faithful way to resist what makes for the war of the *Roman Peace*.

The temptation, of course, for a first century Jew living in the land of the Roman Empire, is simply to replace the violent peace of the Roman Empire with a power-hungry ‘violent peace’ of his own.

But when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, he discovers a third way: engaging the powers of greed and power and idolatry through the nonviolent radical love of God for the enemy.

Yes, I will feed the hungry, he says, but I will do it by blessing the gifts of God and inviting the community to share what they have and not by pretending to be a miracle worker. Yes, I will proclaim the regime change of violent Roman rule, but I will do it by living God’s kingdom of justice and peace and not by returning evil for evil. Yes, I will test God’s power to protect the righteous, he says, but I will do it by trusting this protection throughout all of eternity and not merely through this mortal body.

Yes, I will resist what makes for war, Jesus says. But not the way the Romans do. The way *God* does. Through steadfast, enduring, never-failing, forgiving LOVE. For enemies as well as friends. For self as well as God.

And so he does.

But by and large his disciples cannot figure out how to follow in his footsteps.

Even in his own time, Peter rushes for the sword in defense of his master when the nonviolent way gets really, really hard. Even in our own Scriptures the final book of Revelation envisions a cosmic battle between good and evil with the warrior Jesus. Even within the first few centuries of the emerging religion that rose from the resurrection, the Roman Empire claims the power of the cross of Christ to lead victory into war, rather than reshape their swords into plowshares.

And the truth is the peaceable kingdom of God still has not yet come, as much as Jesus proclaimed that it would. At least not in its final and forever form. And we who follow him two thousand years later face questions of our own as we prepare the way of peace in this Season of Advent.

Fully claimed as the beloved and pleasing children of God. Fully conscious of the reality of our mortality. Fully convicted of the violent ‘anti-peace’ that pervades our every step. And fully convinced that the individual and the international struggle for peace are connected.

So what do we do?

On this Second Sunday of Advent, in the wake of yet another terrorist attack in our country, through yet another mass shooting, followed by yet another spike in the sale of weapons of war?

What do we do?

Perhaps it is time for us to rediscover the “third way” between escapism and retaliation that Jesus discovers for himself through his baptism in the Jordan:

The way of nonviolent active resistance to the things that make for war.

The way of admitting our own propensity for violence and asking God to change our own way of living.

The way of remembering the promise of our baptism: that not only are *we* God’s beloved children, but that our enemies are, too ...

And so we must try to love them ...

And pray for them ...

And place them in the loving grace of God.

That holds them as much as it holds us.

So we may someday, somehow rise again together.

In the eternal shalom of God.

I pray it may be so.

Amen.