

“My Weird Cousin, John”

Mark 1:1-8

Pastor Liz Miller

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Thinking about peace during the month leading up to Christmas always makes me laugh a little. Peace is proclaimed on holiday cards, television specials, and in decorations. But if we're being honest, isn't it also the opposite of how most of us feel this month? It's a time when you take your regular busy life and you add on preparations for family gatherings and company and gift giving. Add parties and tree trimming and grocery lists that have doubled in size. Add the pressure of “It's almost Christmas! Don't you dare complain or look tired or stop smiling this month, because that's not what Christmas is all about!” Finally, you add the memories of people who will be missing at your Christmas dinner table and the grief of all you hope for that you know will not be, and suddenly peace becomes a grand illusion – not something we even hope to achieve this season.

And then we get to church and – I can say this because I know I've been guilty of doing this – we hear messages that tell us if we can create peace within us or in our households, we will really be able to get into the spirit of the season. Forget the stressors and the commitments and the pressures and the grief. We just need peace. What's so hard about that? And if we aren't able to do that, we start worrying that maybe there's something wrong with *us*. *We* assume that everyone else must be filled with and exuding peace in every moment of the day. That's when I start laughing. Not because it's particularly funny, but because I laugh in order to keep from crying.

We are two weeks out from Christmas which is typically the time when I start to see cracks in our facades. We are either advanced planners whose eyes are starting to twitch because all our plans are not yet secure or we are procrastinators who realize the clock is ticking and there are only so many hours left to prepare.

I'm feeling this myself. Last week Beth and I had a video chat with our seven year old nephew, Alex. We asked Alex what he asked for this Christmas and were surprised when the gift we were sure was going to be super original, the gift we already bought him ages ago, was at the top of his wish list to Santa. We were even more surprised when we wrote to Santa's elves and discovered there was already a plan in place for ensuring his wish was fulfilled, a plan that meant we had to start over in our own gift giving, just after we finished patting ourselves on the back for completing with plenty of time to spare. If anyone knows the perfect gift for a seven year old boy that he wouldn't think to ask for himself, talk to me after church. There will be no peace for Alex's two Aunts until we find the receipt for our original gift and find a suitable substitute. It's a minor thing in the grand scheme, but I have a feeling this is going to be our nagging Christmas stressor this year.

It may not be the search for the perfect gift, but there is usually some reason peace alludes us as we march onwards through December, some reason our insides don't match our outer proclamations. But regardless of how we are feeling, every single year our Advent season marks this week with the theme of peace. My goal this year is that no one leaves this sanctuary after hearing a message of peace with a nagging feeling of guilt that you aren't doing peace the right way in your life. We don't have time for guilt or shame this year. None of us have time for one more thing on our to-do lists. Instead, I want to share some Good News with you.

The Good News is that every single year when we explore the theme of peace, we do so through a character in the Bible that is an unlikely symbol of peace. It's not Saint Martha of Stewart or the martyr who died while trying to make their children perfectly pose for the annual Christmas photo. It is John the Baptist, who appears with different descriptions in each of the four Gospels, but is always described as far from imperfect and an unlikely candidate to be the foreteller of peace. He is an outsider, a prophet who didn't come into the cities, but instead had people meet him in the wilderness where he delivered harsh, uncomfortable messages about repentance.

He wore ugly Christmas sweaters before they were fashionable, appearing in clothing made of camel hair which at that time would have smelled as pleasant as well, a camel. John the Baptist would have been the party guest you felt obligated to invite but know would be a royal pain to cater for. While the rest of your guests would be thrilled with hummus and pita appetizers, he'd only eat locusts and wild honey which are inevitably not in season at the local market and impossible to find.

John the Baptist is an unlikely candidate to be the one who heralds peace each year in Advent, yet that is what he does. He is given the task of proclaiming the coming of the Messiah – the Prince of Peace -, even as his wild, unsightly, nonconventional existence flies in the face of our modern trappings of what peace means. The Good News is that if an outsider and misfit like John the Baptist is tied to our theme of peace, surely there is room for us with our imperfections and shortcomings when it comes to seeking and finding peace.

The peace that John proclaims is not the peace that we have come to strive for today. He does not speak of an inner Zen-like state that one must achieve and he does not decree that family members must all get along in order for peace to take root. His message of peace is one that, when looked at closer, brings assurance, and hope – for the world and for ourselves – rather than one more item on our to-do list or one more way we feel like we are failing to live up to the expectations of the season. John's peace is both relational, meaning that it is not up to one person to create, and is Godly, meaning it radiates towards us instead of us having to be the origin of it.

John is a messenger, bringing words that point to another person, a prophet that has yet to come, Jesus. He says, “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” In this way, he worked in relationship with Jesus – building a path and helping create an atmosphere that would be better equipped to receive Jesus. He amplifies Jesus' message and ministry. His role is important one because it reminds us that even Jesus - the Prince of Peace worked in relationship with other people. Jesus had a strong voice, but even he needed others to

strengthen and spread his message of justice and hope. Not even Jesus could do it alone. Remember that next time you start to assume that it is up to you to be the sole peacekeeper or peace maker – not even Jesus did it alone. He worked in relationship with folks like John, and his disciples. He benefited from folks like John who came before him and he relied on the people who followed him to continue to his ministry.

Peace is not something that is created or cultivated in a silo – it is the work of relationships. If you feel like you are not the origin of peace, you can turn to another who radiates the peace you seek and you can amplify their words or their actions. You can share other's stories and experiences of peace when you are still searching for your own moments.

The peace that John symbolizes in Advent is not just relational with other humans, its origin points us towards God. John reminds his followers that he baptizes with water and that soon they will be baptized with the holy spirit. For us, this serves as a reminder of our own baptisms. Baptism is our intentional recognition of our unbreakable connection to God, through the Holy Spirit – our reminder that God's love and grace has been poured out for us and on us, and that nothing can separate us from that love and grace. For Christians, baptism is the ultimate sign of peace because it points to a holy peace that moves through us no matter what we are going through or where we have been. Usually we hear baptism stories after Christmas, when Jesus is grown and received his own baptism, but John the Baptist gives us a timely reminder that there is not just one day of the year or one season when baptism's promises radiate in our lives. God's peace is meant to be a gift for all people that is found through the Holy Spirit, which is symbolized in our baptism. It is a peace that comes to us, to give us hope, to help us on our quest as peacemakers and peacekeepers, to ground us and center us in the midst of a season of stress and grief and heartache and unmet expectations.

There are a lot of burdens we put on ourselves, especially during this holiday season. Our Advent themes each week call us back to a different place and way of being. Peace is no different. Do

not carry the burden of creating and carrying peace on your own. Use this week to seek out the people in your life, or in the world, who have been examples of peace. Even if you don't have the energy to imitate them or follow them, share their stories with your loved ones. Spread their words and actions of peace. Remember that peace is relational – that we spread peace together, each of us playing a different role, each of us working together to fill our communities with peace.

You may find yourself in moments that feel more like war than peace. In those moments, I hope that we will remember that God's peace surrounds us and moves through us. Like the waters of baptism, we've got peace like a river, and it is flowing through us and between us. Keep yourself open enough to receive God's peace in whatever ways it manifests in your life. As we anticipate the birth of Christ, know that God is bringing peace to earth – our earth! - and that it will be made manifest in ways beyond our imagination, even in people as unlikely as John the Baptist, as unlikely as you and I.