

“Messengers of Peace”
Mark 1:1-8

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This weekend was the 8th anniversary of the death of Nelson Mandela. His legacy is as the great anti-apartheid and anti-racism leader, a mediator and practitioner of reconciliation, an expert at conflict resolution. But long ago, early in his life, Mandela was considered an outlier by those he confronted. He was a rebel, someone to be feared and silenced. Mandela spoke hard truths to people who were not ready to hear them. He was part of a long tradition of prophetic leaders who proclaiming the way to justice, urging others to join him in transforming a system of oppression and building a new future for South Africa, one that was not based on the color of one's skin. His words that are remembered as pithy, inspirational quotes today were the same words that landed him in prison and had him labeled as treasonous. We remember him as a peacemaker, but he would have once been known as an inciter of violence.

When I start thinking about what it takes to be a peacemaker, I think of leaders like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez - leaders who spent most of their time in the public making people angry, creating tension and controversy through their activism. In the moment it must have felt like anything but peace, but ultimately they were part of movements that paved the way for what we would now consider great strides towards peace and justice.

There is a new generation of activist leaders who do their work in the midst of the same tension: the young adults in the Sunrise Movement advocating to protect the environment, the Black Lives Matter movement to defund the police, the Parkland activists to end gun violence. When these movements show up in the streets or amplify their voices, they are sometimes met with violence, sometimes with anger, sometimes with well-meaning folks who say, “I support

your ideas in theory but it's too audacious a goal right now. The messaging isn't right. It's never going to work." And still these peace makers persist, understanding that the way to peace is through justice, and the work of justice begins with calling out the systems that cause harm, the policies that are inequitable, and pointing us toward a vision that is as transformational as it is challenging.

This is the paradox of what it means to work for peace: to do so requires entering into conflict and tension, to name injustices and inequities and create a vision for the peace we long for them to transform into. Messengers who bring us dreams of peace are often the ones who stand apart from the crowd, who make us uncomfortable, and who shout out words that are before their time - meaning they might feel a little more radical than we are inclined.

So it was with John the Baptist, clothed in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey. *Hairy and eater of bugs?* No thanks. Before he started shouting he would have stuck out from the crowd and caused more cautious folks to cross over to the other side of the dirt road when he came their way. His message wasn't much more inviting: who wants to hear someone shouting that we need to repent and confess our sins? Every Pride parade I've ever been to has at least one man standing off to the side, shouting something with very similar language, and I make a beeline away from them. The difference though is that instead of shouting a message of shame, John the Baptist proclaims message that points toward God.

God's peace is one that we are called to look for out in the world, in our activism, and at home in our lives. It calls us to ask hard questions, to examine our relationships and our actions, and say, "What is causing harm, either to myself or others? What would it mean to be in right relationship, to be grounded in love? What needs to change in order for me to find peace?" Advent is not an easy season - it is a season of active preparation for a new way of being. In

order to get to peace, we have to acknowledge what isn't working, what needs to change, and what peace will finally look like.

John the Baptist's message is tied to the prophet Isaiah's prophecy saying what *God* is going to do in order for peace to prevail on earth and in our lives. "*I am sending my messenger ahead of you, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'*" In Advent, we are reminded that God comes down to earth to be with us to help us prepare to fill the valleys – those valleys that manifest as aching holes in our heart, the holes that come from loss and from unsustainable relationships or patterns – God comes down to fill those with love. God looks at the mountains – the obstacles that seem too large to overcome, the paths that seem too steep or too treacherous to walk – and God lowers them, making them passable for even the most timid adventurer, restoring hope to the hopeless.

God makes our paths straight, which has nothing to do with what gender you are attracted to, and everything to do with taking the things that seem out of line and downright messed up, and God straightens them out until things make sense again, until things are going in the direction they are supposed to. In Advent, we are reminded that when God is present among us, the rough ways will smooth. The impossible will find a solution. The difficulties will become simple. The pain will turn into healing. The chaos will turn into peace.

Our messengers of peace are reminders of God's presence in our world. Reminders that God is moving us through conflict so that we can know peace through justice. Our longing and preparing for peace at home are reminders that change is possible, and that we are co-conspirators with God as the Holy Spirit weaves messages of peace throughout the world.

This month, you may find yourself in moments that feel more like war than peace. Maybe a moment of frustration of not being able to go somewhere or see someone you typically would

this time of year. A moment when you are trapped in a tense political conversation. A moment when you realize that your child's wish list is longer than Santa was planning on spending. In those moments, I hope that we will remember that God's peace surrounds us. That God is bringing peace to earth – our earth! - and that those moments of stress and strife will soon fade into something much sweeter. May we look to the messengers of peace and lift up gratitude for the ways their strength withstands the conflict that change often brings and moves us toward peace for our lives, for the future, and for all of earth. Amen.