

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Here at Wicker Park we celebrate a seven week Advent season, and let me tell you—I love that we celebrate it for many reasons, not least of which is that I started playing Christmas music really early and justified it to everyone in my life by saying “it’s Advent! I’m allowed to!” (*Hey, I love it for all the theological reasons too!*) But one thing those of you who grew up with a 4-week Advent season like me might remember is that with the 4-week Advent, each Sunday has a different focus: hope, peace, joy, and love. And if we were celebrating the 4-week Advent season here at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, today would be peace Sunday.

With a reading like the one we heard from Isaiah today, it makes sense that we’re celebrating peace Sunday! Isaiah tells us that when Christ comes the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and their young shall lie down together. And what an incredible image of peace that is for us to claim! How joyful is it to know that as we prepare for Christ coming in Advent, this is the future we’re longing for, the future we’re promised will come!

So as we bask in this feeling of peace, we might turn to our Gospel lesson and go... “huh?” Today we hear about John the Baptist, knee-deep in the Jordan River wearing camel’s hair and eating locusts and calling out “Repent!” This is hardly the image of peace we expect.

And yet, John the Baptist is the image of peace we get every single year in the lectionary. Here at Wicker Park and at churches around the world we follow the Common Lectionary, a 3-year cycle of readings that span across the whole Bible. And although we'd have to wait until 2028 to hear the beautiful image of peace from Isaiah again, John the Baptist turns up at this time every single year, like the angry guy at the Christmas party we've been avoiding, saying things we don't really want to hear. It's tempting to try to slip past John unnoticed, to wonder "what in the world were the people who made the Common Lectionary thinking pairing John the Baptist and peace together?"

And yet, I think the experts who wrote the Common Lectionary knew exactly what they were doing. I think John the Baptist calling out into the wilderness is the exact image of peace we need today, that John the Baptist calling out into the wilderness is what makes the image of peace in Isaiah possible.

You see we hear in our Gospel today that Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to John the Baptist to be baptized. So this isn't just a handful of religious eccentrics, this is an entire population of people who were longing for the Messiah to come, who were desperate for the peace they were promised Christ would bring. This is an entire population of people who were living under Roman occupation, who were dissatisfied with violence and oppression, who were hoping for spiritual and physical renewal. And doesn't that sound familiar? That sense of dissatisfaction, that longing for something different is where we find ourselves in Advent. We, too, live in a world grieving violence and injustice, a world aching under the weight of division, a world longing for peace.

Yet within this reality, we often act not like the crowds, but like the Pharisees and Sadducees.

You see Matthew is careful to dress John the Baptist like God's beloved prophet Elijah, who fearlessly preached God's word and called kings toward repentance. All the people who saw John, robed in camel's hair and a leather belt, preaching repentance, would have recognized John as Elijah come again, would have taken this to be a sign that the Messiah was coming.

And yet the Messiah they were longing for was a powerful, conquering king, a political and military leader who would confront Rome, liberate them from occupation, and usher in a new, earthly kingdom of peace. They would have expected the messenger of such a ruler to come from the temple, or at least from the wider city of Jerusalem, which was the Jewish religious and political center at the time. They would have expected a proper-looking messenger calling out from the halls of power, not a man covered in camel's hair yelling into the wilderness. They would have expected a messenger calling Rome to repent, not a wild man in the desert calling for their own repentance.

And so the Pharisees and Sadducees come to see John, but they continue to carry a presumption with them in their hearts. They may be longing for the peace that John is pointing toward, but they don't believe they need to change for that peace to be possible. They may be longing for a new world, but they don't want the disruption of the desert. They may know that repentance is important, but they don't think they are really the ones John is calling toward repentance.

And don't we understand how that feels? How often have we looked around at the world and thought "if only those other people would change, we could all live peacefully?" When we're searching for peace, how often do we surround ourselves with others who think exactly like us, who look exactly like us, who reaffirm our own expectations? How often does peace become more about avoiding tension than about building up genuine community?

To get to the vision of Isaiah, where the wolf shall live with the lamb, where the calf and the lion feed together, where the little child shall lead them, to get to this glorious vision of peace where all have enough and are enough and live in harmony, we must first understand one another. We must first seek to be in genuine community with one another, we must seek to listen not just to the voices coming from halls of power but to the voices crying out in the wilderness. We must seek to listen not just to the voices that confirm what we already believe, but to those voices that are inviting us to consider something new. The wolf cannot live with the lamb until the wolf understands the lamb. The kid cannot lie down with the lion until the lion is willing to try a new thing.

And that's the incredible message of hope that John the Baptist has for us in our Gospel lesson today. He says "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

Notice that he doesn't say "You need to repent so that the kingdom of God can come near." He simply says "the kingdom of heaven has come near." It is already here! John is proclaiming a new reality! He's proclaiming that Jesus is coming, that the peace that is depicted in Isaiah is possible, that the

type of peace that goes against all our earthly expectations has been made possible through Christ and that we are invited into this peace and this community freely because God loves us so much. He's proclaiming that this peace, this promise, this love is not contingent on us, but is freely given to us by a God who will never stop loving us, by a God that wants us to live in peace and community together.

And, into that gift of grace, John also invites all of us to repent. This invitation to repent might feel scary, but it's actually life-giving good news. In Greek, the word repent literally means to change one's mind, and biblical scholars tend to think of it more broadly as a complete reversal, as a total reorientation. By saying "Repent! The kingdom of God has come near," John is saying Christ is coming to do a new thing, Christ is coming to turn the world upside down and we are invited to participate in it. We are invited to completely reorient ourselves, to turn away from the way the world seeks to separate us and turn toward the peace Christ calls us into. We are invited to turn away from echo chambers and turn toward genuine community. We are invited to recognize what one of the other great prophets of our time MLK Jr said: that peace isn't the absence of tension, but the presence of justice. The peace Isaiah foretold isn't a peace where the lambs lie with the lambs and the wolves lie with the wolves and they continue on in their separate ways. That type of false, shallow peace is certainly easier to imagine in our world today, but it isn't the body of Christ.

No, instead in our Gospel today, we are invited to listen for voices where we least expect them, to set down our blame long enough for God to hold up a mirror to us, to choose curiosity and community over convenience. We are

invited to be like the crowd who heard the voice of John the Baptist crying out not in the halls of power they expected, but in the wilderness, who stepped out of their comfort zone, who left behind their routines and expectations, and met him at the water. Who at the water through baptism formed an entirely new community, a community that we welcome Nya and Taj into today, a community where we're invited to practice the ethics of peace each and every Sunday as we eat together at God's table, where there is enough room for all.

On this peace Sunday, we are reminded that the peace Isaiah offers isn't passive. It doesn't simply happen. It's a peace born from repentance, from justice, from choosing community over comfort. It's a peace that trusts God is already transforming our small acts into the future Isaiah dared to envision. And that's why John the Baptist's shrill voice in the wilderness, as unexpected as it seems, is the perfect image of peace.

So as we go throughout this week, may we hear John's cry not as condemnation but as an invitation – an invitation to step out of our own expectations and into the body of Christ. For today we are reminded that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Christ is drawing us into a new world, a world where the calf and the lion live joyously together. May we have the courage to turn toward this new world, together. **Amen.**