

Luke 1:46-55

Mary's Song of Praise

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Matthew 11:2-11

Messengers from John the Baptist

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus Praises John the Baptist

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Finding Peace...

If you've been reading the *Living Well Through Advent* booklet that Pastor Diana gave as a gift to us a few weeks back, then you'll know that today's reading is entitled, "Finding Peace Where We Are Planted". And if you've been participating in our *Evergreen Book Club Group* on Facebook, then you'd know that I don't usually participate in seasonal devotionals, but I did in this one and I am glad that God nudged me into it.

The theme is practicing Peace with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and that's **really** not that easy a thing to do in today's society, particularly during the holiday season when we have **s-o-o-o** many distractions pecking away at us!

If you've read the booklet, then you know that on the first Sunday the topic was "Peace Like A River" by Rev. Laurie Brock. She writes,...

Peace like a river challenges my thinking about peace. I want peace to be an easy state, free of any discomfort and anxiety. And it is, at times.

But the peace of God is not the peace of humans. Too often human peace comes at the expense of silencing or ignoring disparate voices. We want calm and quietude without the work of shifting and changing our own souls.

If you remember, this was the Sunday after opening our church to the homeless and, like many of you, I was frustrated, angry and depressed. I saw what should have been a good thing spiral into chaos and then as I began to hear from some of you, I realized that in this situation I failed you as your Lay Leader – and for that I apologize. To quote from the Captain in *Cool Hand Luke*, “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.”

The topic on our third day of reading was *Peace Is More Than the Absence of Conflict*. Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner writes,

The peace that Jesus offers to us and calls us to live into is not just the absence of conflict, but is the active and abundant presence of love, justice, reconciliation, and compassion....

Jesus...is calling us to actively practice and create a more profound, more authentic love and peace with the people in our lives we find the most challenging.

Folks, we are a family here. And I think you’ll agree that dealing with family is sometimes one of the most complicated aspects of living in this world.

Day five’s topic was *The Risks of Practicing Peace*. Stoner reminds us that seeking to bring peace and healing in a conflicted relationship will likely involve conversations that may initially be uncomfortable. Our attempts to bring peace to a relationship or situation will require us to step outside our “comfort zone.”

As God's faithful people, He is calling us to grow beyond the places where things are easy and comfortable. If we ignore God's call to grow, we may get a false sense of peace, but upon deeper reflection, we will see that it is superficial; it is not the more profound expression of peace that God wants for us.

Here is what I hope to communicate to you today. Though it may be uncomfortable for you, I hope you will always feel free to express your concerns and desires for this church family to your leadership – whether it be me, Kris, Pastor Diana or other committee leaders. You may think it will hurt our feeling (and it may for a bit), but it is the **only** way that we can build this community in a manner that is pleasing to the Prince of Peace. And if you think that we are not hearing you properly, feel free to tell us! If we appear distracted to you, wait until you feel you have our full attention!

In the future, I will do my best to make sure you are informed and have input on important issues prior to its implementation.

This recent experience with serving the homeless citizens of our town reminded me of the importance of connecting with others in the faith community of Fort Bragg, so that we all may be more successful in our mission of reaching the poor. The more people involved, the more successful we will be in serving, not only the needs of the poor, but of shut ins, veterans, children and families. It also made me aware that our church doesn't have a well-defined mission, that is reflective of a small, aging congregation. Please think about this over the next month. When I share the message in January, I would like to hear your ideas of

what you think our mission should be in being the hands and feet of Christ in our community.

In our second Gospel reading from Matthew, we find John the Baptist seeking assurance from Jesus that He is the chosen one of God. Did you notice that Jesus didn't give John's disciples a "Yes" or "No" answer? Instead he tells them to tell John what they've seen and heard. In other words, Jesus let his actions speak for him saying only, "...blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.". Then he went on to explain that John the Baptist was more than a prophet. He was God's messenger sent to help prepare the way. Usually, when God sends a messenger, he sends one of His Arch-Angels like Michael or Gabriel. Perhaps this is why Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; *yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*" That second half of his comment is important. Here is my thinking of why if you haven't been baptized, you may want to consider it...

If we wish to be as Christ was, the first thing he did before beginning his ministry was to be baptized by John. The symbolism of baptism is that you are dying to the way of this world and being reborn into the Way of Jesus. In essence, we are reborn into the image of Christ. This is why the *least* born into the kingdom of heaven is *greater* than the greatest person born into any earthly kingdom.

If you would like to be baptized into the Way of Jesus, talk to me, Kris or Pastor Diana so we can make the arrangements for you.

Today's topic in our Living Well booklet is *Finding Peace Where We Are Planted* and it relates around Mary's Magnificat. The writer reflects upon a vacation he took to Cuba and how the people he met were at peace with their way of life.

He says,

While we often speak of "making peace" as if it *our* doing, scripture tells us that peace is something that *God* gives and promises. Somehow it seems most faithful to think that we must actively struggle for peace, as if we must force it to happen. My experience in Cuba... reminded me how powerful and fruitful it can be to embrace whatever peace already exists, even in challenging circumstances. Perhaps as we nurture the ability to see and surrender to whatever peace God has already given us, we are better able to faithfully follow the compass that guides us and, like Mary..., find ways to bring peace into bloom wherever we're currently planted."

Brothers and sisters, may we work to find peace by blooming here where we are planted.

I ask this in the Name and the Way of Jesus our Prince of Peace. Amen.

Benediction

In our Lord's peaceful kingdom, the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them. With hearts hungry for this vision of harmony, let us put faith in the child of Bethlehem and follow him in the way of peace.