

Those Who Dream of Peace

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] All right, so I'm pretty excited this evening to be with you and to be able to continue our Advent sermon series that we're calling Those Who Dream.

As I've been kind of preparing for this sermon and thinking about this sermon, I've been spending some time conjuring up the sights and the sounds and the smells of the Christmas season.

And I've been remembering a lot about the Christmases of my childhood. I don't know if you get to this time of year and you start to think about how you spent your younger years.

I've been thinking about the way that the Landises in Greensboro, North Carolina, used to spend their Christmas mornings. And I've started to think some about some of the most memorable gifts I've ever received.

That year I got TLC's Crazy Sexy Cool album. That was a year. One year, my brother gave me a romance novel.

[1 : 01] And I don't know how my parents, my church-going parents, let that pass, but it did. And then I'll never forget the time somebody gave me a perfectly wrapped Gillette razor as a preteen.

And it was this not-so-subtle hint that I was being initiated into the ways of proper femininity. And clearly that didn't take.

So, you know. But I've also been realizing that Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and the day after Christmas had these particular rhythms in my family.

They were defined by kind of these three things. On Christmas Eve and Christmas night, we would cook into the wee hours of the morning. On the day after Christmas, we would travel to the country to have dinner with my extended family.

And then third, we would do all of those things with a kind of soundtrack that was played extremely loud of Christmas music. See, my father only really listens to music on three days.

[2 : 10] And he listens very loudly. And he listens nonstop. And it's because of the diversity of that Christmas listening, his Christmas listening, that I've come to, like, have a real appreciation for Christmas music and kind of a wide, you know, been exposed to a wide variety of Christmas music.

And having listened to a lot of it, I'm pretty clear on what some of my favorite songs are, and particularly on what my absolute favorite song is.

At the top of my list is Happy Christmas by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. It's also known as War Is Over. In the absolute best years of growing up, right before the clock would strike midnight, we'd all be in the kitchen making my parents' favorite coconut cake and favorite potato salad.

And right at midnight, Happy Christmas would come on the radio, and I would, like, grab my mother, and we would twirl around. And I love that song because it's filled with joy.

But it also is filled with this kind of appropriate introspection for the season in which we're all too often dulled by distraction. So this is Christmas.

[3 : 30] And what have you done? That's the question the song asks over and over again, asking us to ponder less the gifts that we are going to give and to receive, and more the gifts that we are to become.

And partway through the first section of the song, you start to hear these childlike voices in the background, singing in a way that almost feels like this haunting chant of possibility. War is over if you want it.

War is over now. That song never fails to draw my attention to the famous hope in Isaiah 2, that when Messiah comes, he will judge with justice.

And in response, the people will fashion from their swords and spears, plowshares and pruning hooks, instruments for cultivation of food rather than for fighting.

And nor will they train for war anymore. In a lot of ways, for me, it feels like it's not a surprise that the people who wrote Happy Christmas also wrote, Yoko Ono and John Legend also wrote Imagine.

[4 : 51] To consider a world without war, a world in which the way has been prepared for the coming of God, requires this profound restoration. And I would even say a profound resurrection of the imagination.

It requires this kind of radical dreaming, or maybe it's better to say the freedom and the faith to dream.

God-sized dreams, dreams that God dreams. And not many of us, including me, have that kind of freedom and have that kind of faith.

Yet the stories about the coming of God in the birth of Jesus, they're filled with dreams. It seems that it is those who dream who are best prepared for the coming of God.

And I'll confess one more thing. One more song that I really love. I really love Happy Christmas, but there's one more song that also really grabs me around this time of year, and it's a Christmas song called I Heard the Bells of Christmas Day.

[6 : 03] It's by CCM artist casting crowns no judgment. Okay. It's derived from a poem that was written during the Civil War by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

And here are a couple of the stanzas in that poem. I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, goodwill to men, and thought how, as the day had come, the bell furies of all Christendom had rolled along the unbroken song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Till ringing, singing on its way, the world revolved from night to day, a voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Then from each black accursed mouth, the cannon thundered in the south, and with the sound the carols drowned, of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

And in despair, I bowed my head. There is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

[7 : 23] That's an important poem to me because most of the time I live my life inside of the tension of that song. And the tension between hope for peace on earth and goodwill to men and the reality of constantly booming canons of idolatry and inhumanity.

And I suspect I'm not the only one. I live with this temptation to live despairingly with my head bowed instead of remaining alert, with closing down instead of remaining alert to the God who comes every single day, every single day.

I only want to look at the facts on the ground instead of looking toward God's futuring fantasy. So this Sunday of Advent, this Sunday when Christians of every imaginable background traditionally light the Advent candle for peace, this Sunday often feels strained.

I don't think that in this country we know how to talk a lot about peace well. We use a lot of cheap stand-ins for peace.

We call silence peace. We consider order peace. We often think of the security state as God's shalom in the American dream as a kingdom of God.

[8 : 47] Most days I'd rather talk about justice than peace. That's something that I have the vocabulary for.

And I'll just say as an aside, I'm one of the people who, and I have not seen Wakanda forever, so I know that this reference to Black Panther is risky, but I saw Black Panther, when I saw it years ago, I cried through the whole last part of the movie because I was rooting for Killmonger.

That movie, which is about the dilemmas that face African and African Americans and people of African descent in general, in that movie, Killmonger is the one that has a clear plan to help the oppressed people of the world, but it's a plan that's rooted in vengeance.

It's a plan that offers catharsis, but then you get this other character, T'Challa, who actually chooses the way of peace, who chooses to give away the gifts of the Wakandans through education and transparency.

And that reminded me of how hard it is for me to root for peace. It reminded me of the Jesus who scandalously opens up across boundaries and comes.

[10 : 10] It reminds me that justice always must serve love, and that's the only way to get to peace. So as we move forward on this, we are going to get to the scripture, y'all.

So as we move forward on this second Sunday of Advent that's dedicated to peace, I recognize the tension. So I want to take us to a part of Mark that I think can enlighten us a little bit.

So we're going to go to Mark 1, 1 through 8, and think a little bit about how this part of scripture might teach us about peace, might teach us about dreaming, and about preparing the way for the coming of God.

Mark 1, 1 through 8. Feel free to look that up if you have a Bible, or I think it's on the screen. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

[11 : 22] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.

I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

So what we have here in this text is it's a liberation text. It proclaims right from the outset a gospel that is outside of the gospel of Caesar.

In the typical style of Mark, the writer immediately throws us into this sense that you find the entire book of Mark, that this gospel is a gospel contrary to the ideology of Rome.

[12 : 38] It proclaims a Jewish Messiah who will bring lasting peace over and against the Pax Romana, the peace that Rome proclaimed. And it's no mistake that this citation draws the reader back to this moment in Israelite history in Isaiah 40 and into this moment in which God was acting for the deliverance of the Babylonian people, of the Israelite people from Babylonian captivity.

In that moment, you can check it out in Isaiah 40, God was speaking comfort. Just as God had delivered the Hebrews from slavery, God was now bringing Exodus.

The prophet Isaiah envisions a literal highway through the wilderness on which those who were exiled could walk back to safety, could walk back home.

And it's no accident that Mark starts this book announcing the coming of Jesus the Messiah by showing us John in the wilderness by the River Jordan, which would have strongly reminded those first hearers of God's liberation.

After all those years, God had been perceived to be silent. And there emerges this sense that God is speaking again. And see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you.

[14 : 05] That message would have brought comfort. But it also would have brought this sense of coming judgment. Because the other part of this citation from Isaiah actually goes back to Malachi 3.

I'm going to read that because I think it's helpful when we think about the season. See, I'm sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify. Then I will draw near to you for judgment. Today in right square on this second Sunday of Advent, we have this piece of scripture that's a liberation scripture.

It's about God's liberating presence. It's about comfort, but it's also about a judgment that should be good news because it's about setting the world right. It's about righteousness and justice, righteousness and peace, kissing, as the psalmist says.

[15 : 20] And those of us who are called, all of us in this room to clear the road for the kind of comfort and refining that comes from God are asked to hear.

I want to say one more thing. I'm going to just say, name a couple of takeaways from the scripture. But before I do that, I want to ground, I guess, it's easy to stand here and to give in this season to talk through, like, what does it mean to prepare the way?

And that to become just another thing for you to do? So I want to start by saying that in this piece of scripture, it is super ambiguous who is doing what, who the messenger is, who the road is being cleared for.

You can read it a number of different ways. And one of the ways I read it is that the way is being prepared for us. And that means that we can root down in grace.

So I want to start, I want to say that before I say anything else. that what issues for from this text is the sense that we can rest in God and what God does.

[16:35] There's this poem by T.S. Eliot called Ash Wednesday that has this line that I love that I think gets at this work of preparing the way and it's teach us to care and not to care.

And that line captures this paradox of being attached and letting go, of living fully by grace and yet knowing that what you do matters, of both being deeply committed to rest and of saying with civil rights that leader Ella Baker that we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

The way has been prepared already for you by an incarnate God, by a God who's created us in their image. So I want to say that before I say anything else.

But I will say that the main question that always comes up with this text is what does it mean to prepare the way? How do you do that? And I would say that there are as many answers to that question as there are people in this room.

And yet I think that there are a few things to point out here. So first, those who dream of the advent of God prepare the way through their repentance.

[17:49] John comes into this wilderness, into the space ripe for liberation, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. Advent is this time of joy.

And it's also a time of preparation traditionally. It's a time of thinking about what we're growing from and what we're growing into. And I know that talking about repentance is super uncomfortable. It's really uncomfortable for us to talk about, especially in this room, because of the ways that word has been used against us. And the word that usually proceeds is sin, also has really problematic connotations in the way that many of us have encountered it.

There's usually one biblical metaphor for sin that gets used over and over again, and it's the metaphor around purity and impurity. It turns on contamination logic, even though there's a ton of other ways to think about sin.

You can think about sin in the Bible, and the Bible, biblical writers think about sin as falling down and getting back up, of stepping off the path and stepping back on.

[19:01] There are all kinds of ways to think about sin that are less about taking on shame than that one metaphor most of us, or maybe many of us, have been taught.

And in the same way, I think we need a broader range of vocabulary around what it means to repent. For example, in anti-racist and justice-oriented spaces, people talk about the work of dismantling systems of domination.

And then to do, so then you can think about repentance as asking what needs to be dismantled inside of you. There's a writer, Sonia Marie Taylor, that I love, and she talks about, this is one way I think you could frame repentance, and I'm just trying to show it in a creative way here.

She talks about the ladder of hierarchy. That is at work in all of us. This ladder by which we compare ourselves to people as either greater or lesser.

The ladder that puts white, cis, straight, able-bodied people at the top and black, brown, disabled, trans bodies at the bottom. And here's what she says. Think about this through the lens of repentance.

[20:08] The most powerful way to destroy the ladder is to destroy the ladder inside yourself. and destroying the ladder inside of ourselves. It's about looking at where does the system live inside of me?

Where does the system of comparison live inside of me? How am I judging myself, judging my own being based on this hierarchy? Because the thing that makes the ladder real is our attempt to continue to climb it.

It's one way of thinking about repentance. I could name others that are about ego or thinking about the false self or working through idolatry and inhumanity. There are so many ways.

But I think that this text invites us to consider the ways that we might repent and the rhythm of repentance appropriate for our lives. I think there's something richer to consider around the word repentance than most of us know.

And then the other thing that I would say about this is that those who dream of a coming God are invited to prepare the way through their repentance but that repentance will lead to humility. [21 : 21] And I don't mean shame there. I mean humility. I'm talking about this self-awareness that opens us up to a greater awareness of the world. I know that we often think of John as a brazen prophet but I think that we don't think of John often enough as a dreamer, as a person of imagination.

John didn't live for the future. John lives from the future. He announced the future in his body by the clothes that he wore which would have reminded people of Elijah and the dawning of the new world to come.

He drew sustenance from outside the system of Rome by eating locusts and wild honey. John's dream is far different than the triumphalism that we often carry that often masquerades as progress. He doesn't come with five easy steps to become more productive for the sake of the dream. He doesn't tell the people who gather at the river to take more control of your life while you wait for the dream.

Instead, John speaks of the stronger one. He speaks of the one who is equipped to confront the powers, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit which is to say the one who judges the wrong ways that power has been used and chooses to democratize it.

[22 : 50] The stronger one is coming and John in John's humility is able to lean down into long-term commitment. commitment. John, in John's humility commits to something that he will never see.

He becomes critical yeast before he becomes critical mass. And he carries this dream that he has to pass on to others. One of the questions I often think about in Advent is do we have any dreams that are so big that we know they won't be fulfilled?

and how comfortable are we in cultivating humility and acceptance of that reality? All right, so I started this sermon with a confession that preaching about peace isn't easy for me.

I want to be the kind of person who's like John who imagines and lives from the future but I find it hard to find the kind of freedom and courage that John had to dream these dreams.

And even as I know that repentance and humility are key to preparing the way for the stronger one who comes in the form of a baby, there are times when despair, near despair, shapes my actions more than peace and I think can shape our actions more than peace.

[24 : 12] Yet the reason I love that poem, The Christmas Bells, is not only because it rightly diagnoses the tension so many of us feel but also because it speaks truth into that tension.

Here's how that poem ends. And in despair I bowed my head. There is no peace on earth, I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Then pilled the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Advent dreaming is about the truth that the wrong shall fail, the right prevail. That all things that are not right will be set right, will be made right.

Preparing the way in repentance and humility emerges from that truth, from that reality. And it's the only truth from which lasting peace can come.

[25 : 19] it's the only truth that it shall give even what will happen to the rank of the Jorge and the shields and then the affirmed will be made right in the back of the ■ and I want you to go to your power and you want me to be