



Sermon

Advent: Peace

Malachi 3:1-4 ; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:2-6

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Shalom is the Jewish greeting. You hear it frequently in the Bible and in modern Israel. When Helen and I were in Jerusalem in 1989, as we walked through the old city near the end of a Friday afternoon, people greeted each other and even us strangers and obvious tourists as we were, with “Shabbat Shalom” – Sabbath Peace.

The word is richer than peace meaning lack of conflict. It has four broad meanings:

- Wholeness of life – that is good health,
- Right relationship or harmony between people particularly when established by a covenant,
- Prosperity, success, fulfilment,
- Victory over enemies or absence of war.

We can see that it is a broad and rich word. To greet someone with *Shalom*, as I have described is meant as a blessing. It says: may you be healthy, in harmony with others and prospering! I did feel honoured as a gentile in Jerusalem to be greeted with “Shabbath Shalom” but I didn’t realise quite how much goodwill the word carried.

The second candle of the Advent wreath is said to symbolize peace. Why might that have been chosen?

The Lectionary does not follow the themes of the Advent wreath, it takes us through some of the prophecies of the coming Messiah, the ministry of John the Baptist who would introduce the Messiah to Israel and the Annunciation when Gabriel told Mary she would be the mother of Messiah.

Malachi wrote about 400 years before Christ:

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. ¹

A messenger will prepare the way before God: Matthew, Mark and Luke all identify this messenger as John the son of Zechariah, John the Baptist. God himself had said, he “will prepare the way for me.” A messenger to prepare the way for God.

In the gospel reading we see this being fleshed out. Luke tells us that John went around the Jordan region preaching that people must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

¹ Malachi 3:1

John quoted from Isaiah saying that he was preparing the way for the Lord, making straight paths for him, levelling the ground, raising valleys and lowering hills, smoothing out the pathways. No, he was not working for Fulton Hogan. It was an extended metaphor for the hearts of the people. He was preparing the way in people's thinking and allegiances to allow them to be open to the Messiah. Why? That people may see God's salvation.

There is a double meaning there. The name *Jesus* means 'God saves.' Jesus is God's salvation. So seeing God's salvation would both be to see Jesus and to receive his salvation.

As Advent has a double focus, pointing us both to the earthly ministry of Jesus and to his return, so Malachi looks through the events of one to see the other beyond. He goes on to describe the return of Christ with a description of the purifying, cleansing behaviour of the Lord who will come. Here is judgment ("Who can stand when he appears?") Some items are cleansed by refining – it is fire which purifies metals. Some items cannot stand fire and must be washed. Both images are used here – everything will be purified.

Yes in both time frames there is cleansing: John the Baptist is concerned to wash men's souls through repentance and baptism. The second coming is also a time of purifying and cleansing.

In the Epistle, Paul points his readers – he points you and me – to the work God continues to do in us until the day of Christ Jesus – the day of his return and judgement. Paul is confident that when God starts a good work he will bring it to completion. As we grow in Christ, our love will grow greater and our lives increasingly be pure and blameless – cleansed – until the day of Christ.

In each of these three readings there is reference to Christ's coming: Malachi points to the first and second advents; Philippians points to the second coming; Luke focuses here on the first. And all three readings have this cleansing, purifying theme. He will refine and wash; there is a call to repentance and to make the ways of one's life straight.

Peace of God

And it is here that we find the link to peace. Peace is a characteristic of God. You will remember in the series on Psalm 23, we looked at some of the names of God. Here's another name of God: When Gideon saw the Angel of the Lord, he made an altar and called it *Yahweh Shalom*, the LORD is Peace.²

Peace is a facet of the fruit of the Spirit. Paul lists the nine qualities of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. As the fruit of the Spirit, they are the nature of the Spirit of God. And these fruit can be seen as aspects of agape love - and God is love.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be the Prince of Peace and there would be no end to the increase of his reign and peace.³ Paul wrote, "God is not a God of disorder but of peace."⁴

Peace with God

As sinners, and all of us have sinned, we make ourselves rebels and enemies of God. Jesus offers us salvation which brings us back into right relationship with God. Paul says in Romans 5,

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. [NLT]

And in Colossians 1:

For God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.⁵

The sacrifice Jesus made was to reconcile us back to God. That is the primary connection between Advent and Peace. Forgiveness of our sins bring peace with God. Instead of being enemies and rebels, we are adopted as children and heirs by God. We are granted the privilege of access to God and favour in his sight.

² Judges 6:24

³ Isaiah 9:6-7

⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:33

⁵ Colossians 1:19-20

Do you know that peace with God? It is the wonderful result of knowing you are forgiven and accepted by God. Jesus died to make it possible. Our part is to believe the promises of Scripture that it is so and put our trust in him as our Saviour and Redeemer.

We don't have to understand how this salvation works, we are asked to trust the promises. You don't have to understand how an X-Ray works when you have a broken bone.

You may remember that in 2015, Lindy, Anne, Helen and I visited a Maasai village and I baptised 28 of the tribe that day. The first up was Yerima, a leader in the new church there. Recently I received a video call from his cousin, Jackson, passing on his greetings and asking when I come to see him again. Think of it: a Maasai tribesman was sitting in his grass hut in the outbacks of Tanzania having a free video conversation with me at my desk in Whangaparaoa! Isn't that extraordinary! Yet neither he nor I had to understand how it worked. We just had to make use of the provision.

You don't have to understand how your blood pressure medication works – you trust the doctor and take it. These are all things that are understandable but most of us don't have the knowledge – we still use them for good.

We can understand some principles of how salvation works, but there is much beyond our understanding. Nevertheless, Jackson the Maasai is able to benefit from free video calling because he uses the provision made available and he is able to trust in Jesus for salvation because he trusts in the promises of the Bible.

If you haven't already, will you trust the promises of the Bible and ask Jesus to save you and to make peace between you and God? It does take a definite decision to ask and to trust. It is simple, it is profound. To say it is life-changing or life-giving is true but also a huge understatement! Jesus is eternal life. This is eternal life giving and changes our lives for ever and eternity!

Peace from God

Because peace is a quality of God, he is also the source of peace. We see that when Jesus, the Prince of Peace gave peace to his disciples:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.⁶

And that gift of peace is powerful. You will know that Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6-7:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That peace God gives us acts in a way which surprises us. Have you ever been in a challenging situation and yet your heart has been at peace? That is the peace which passes understanding. When I have experienced it, I have actually been puzzled at why I am not upset. I should be – but I am not. That is the peace of God holding us steady.

Peace flowing through our lives

As we have peace with God and God's peace develops in our lives, it starts to flow out to those around us. We can't always be at peace with other people. We know there will be those who oppose us because they reject the one we follow. But Paul says very practically in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

As we do that, we express something of the nature of our heavenly Father. His likeness is showing through our lives. It is love expressed in harmonious relationships.

At this time, we are all dealing with stresses we are not used to. When we face change and the unknown it can make us tense and it uses a lot of mental and emotional energy. We are all navigating the change from Alert Level 3 to the Red Traffic light system. We can be those who rest in the peace of God.

⁶ John 14:27

Isaiah wrote, “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.”⁷ That’s the key – steadfastly trusting God. When emotions build up – try stopping and lean back into the peace Jesus offers us. We have peace with God because our sins are forgiven. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit who gives us his fruit including peace. We have the impartation of the peace of God.

We may find ourselves frustrated by the restrictions of the Vaccine pass system. It may be simply because we have not got the Pass with us and so cannot do what we wish. It may be because we are eligible for a pass. Some families won’t be able to meet as usual at Christmas for all sorts of reasons and that may cause grief, anger or upset.

Remember that our friends and families are still our friends and families. Let’s not let different understandings and choices spoil our relationships. As far as it lies with us, let us be at peace with everyone.

Let us pray. Father, you are the father of lights and the source of wisdom. Your wisdom, the wisdom from heaven, is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.⁸

Help us, Father, to allow your wisdom to grow more and more in our hearts, as we follow Christ, so we may be those who are peace-loving and peacemakers sowing seeds of peace. And then Lord, may there be as your word says, a harvest of righteousness. Amen

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⁷ Isaiah 26:3

⁸ James 3:3:17-18 (NLT)