

Advent 2 – Peace
Malachi 3:1-4
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

*“Neath vine and fig tree they shall live;
Shall live at peace and unafraid...”*

This promise from several of the prophets is not meant as “pie in the sky”. It was born out of decades of anxiety and uncertainty and fear. Think of the general kind of insecurity we have experienced as a country since 9/11/01. Now imagine those questions of safety and threat going on for decades when the threat is not from a relatively small band of extremists, but from the largest and most powerful armies on earth. This promise came at a time when foreign armies had threatened or actually had destroyed Jewish cities and states.

Yet in the midst of the crisis, the prophet cries that *this* is God’s will for the people, to live in *shalom*. Not just in a truce, but unafraid. To live in abundance, with grape vines and fig trees surrounding them. Now, grapes require some time before they perform well, several years of maturity. Figs produce fairly rapidly, after about 18 months, but they do better if they are shaded when they are young, which means that there is implicit in the prophet’s message a vision of a settled land, with larger plants, stable vegetation that has taken root.

Both figs and grapes require cultivation and care – pruning and fertilizing in order to bear good fruit. So a place where vines and fig trees grow abundantly is a place where people have time to attend to them.

I thought a lot about peace this week.

On my way home from a meeting in New York State I was listening to the radio, to the Christmas Carol station(!), and I heard “Snoopy’s Christmas.” Now, I actually know all the words to that because we learned it in 5th or 6th grade for our school holiday program. And we thought it was fun. But lately whenever I hear it, it makes me cry. *“Christmas bells, those Christmas bells, ring across the land. Asking peace of all the earth and good will to men.”*

I thought about the “Christmas Cease fires” they used to announce in the Viet Nam war during my youth, and I remember that even then I asked, “If they can stop killing each other for 24 hours, why can’t they go longer?”

I thought about the President’s announcement of an increase in troops in Afghanistan.

And I grieved for the vision of peace.

Some people will tell you that “peace” in a Christian sense is strictly personal – you know, if you know Jesus you will have peace in your life. It’s like those cars with the bumper stickers that say “Too blessed to be stressed.” I want to kick those cars. I know Jesus. I believe in him, trust him. I still have stress! Somehow we make God’s grace into a magic wand that automatically produces hope, peace, joy, love...*Shazam!*

But what if grace is really a seed? God plants it and provides what we need to help it bear fruit, but we have a part in it, too. What if peace required us to truly live in the ways that *make* for peace? Requiring justice for the poor? Requiring accountability from our politicians beyond bashing them on TV and radio? Examining our own lives for ways we have used and depended on violence to get our own way or for an uneasy protection? Do we really seek the righteousness of restored and remade relationships when we seek forgiveness, or do we just want to be let off the hook?

God can do great miracles in our world when we are willing to let it be so.

I want to share two ideas that have come out of my reflections on peace. The first is that the prophets proclaimed peace, the promise of God’s peace, in times that were profoundly violent and threatening. It’s easy to proclaim God’s love, providence, grace, and blessing when times are good. How do we do it, how do we *live* that promise when times are hard? When we have lost someone precious? When our hearts are broken and we are afraid? How do we risk the pain of new birth, for all human life is born out of pain.

The second thought is related to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah was a priest and probably served in the Temple once a year, in the Holy of Holies probably only once in his lifetime. He and his wife Elizabeth had gone through their marriage with the pain of infertility. Then when he is in the Temple, he is visited by an angel who tells him that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son who is to be named John. And Zechariah cannot believe that this can happen. And because of his doubts, he becomes mute, he loses his voice.

How does our doubt that God will do something miraculous in our lives, in our world, take away our voice? What does it mean to experience a miracle? Is it all good? All easy? Might there not be pain and loss involved in a miracle? Do we not recognize them because they are not simply triumphant moments and events?

Miracles happen when we nourish the seeds of grace – when we gather together to share bread and cup, laughter and tears, great griefs and great joys; as we live in discerning the love that moves us into God’s realm of peace. It was not at the height of David’s reign, but in the depths of Roman oppression that God sent the message to declare God’s choice to be present among us, with us, for us. Where in your life, in our life together, are we called to be reshaped, remade, restore, to prepare a place for peace?