**December 5, 2021 Luke 3:1-6**

***Peace***

**Scripture: *Luke 3:1-6 NRSV***

*(1)In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, (2)during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (3)He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, (4)as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (5)Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; (6)and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

**Notes:**

1. The text begins by ***contrasting*** the kingdoms of the world with the kingdom of God.
   1. Luke identifies the ***people*** in charge.
   2. The kingdom of God seems to be coming from a ***wilderness*** place through a prophet with little clout.
   3. God’s kingdom is ***operating*** very differently.
2. John is baptizing people into a new ***citizenship***.
   1. The ***radical*** part of John’s message is in what he was asking.
   2. This act of repentance leads to ***significant*** change.
3. A voice calling out in the wilderness, paths being made straight, valleys raised up, and mountains made low is a call to ***active*** and ***difficult*** peacemaking.
   1. The kingdom of God creates a ***level*** playing field.
   2. A kingdom of ***peace*** is one in which people have justice.
   3. This type of ***peace*** is a painful process.
4. The great hope of the inbreaking kingdom of God as a kingdom-of-peace work is that it enters into the world through ***ordinary*** people.
   1. John the Baptist was preaching ***repentance*** and preparing a path for Christ.
   2. We too are called to ***participate*** in the kingdom of God.
   3. We are called in many ways to be ***peacemakers***.
5. “The path toward peace isn’t ***easy***.
   1. Without the work, challenge, and upsetting the status quo, ***peace*** will not come”.
   2. We work to see the kingdom ***here*** on earth as it is in heaven.

**Script:**

In many ways the advent season is a season of soul searching, and the search for the true reason for this time period we call Christmas. I have shared some of the struggles and feelings I have felt over the years during this time of year. And somehow our thoughts return to Christmas’s past, Christmas’s shared with our children when they were young; Christmas’s past spent with our parents and siblings when we were young; and for some of us we return to that first Christmas eve, the night when Christ was born. I have tried to imagine what it would have been like for Mary as she delivers the greatest gift to this world; or for Joseph, preparing to raise a child that was to be Immanuel, God with us, God in flesh and blood, God incarnate; but ultimately, I imagine what it was like for the shepherds. They were out in the fields watching over their sheep and they have the greatest experience when the angels of the Lord light up the sky and share the news of the Messiahs birth.

When we think of this time, we also consider scripture. Perhaps the greatest portion of scripture for Christmas is found in Luke chapter 2 it has been forever immortalized in the Charlie Brown Christmas special when in frustration Chuck cries out in desperation, “Does anybody what Christmas is all about?” That is when Linus walks to the center of the stage and recites the passage from verses 8 – 14. We are especially touched when Linus who carries a security blanket everywhere he goes drops the blanket when he quotes the angels stating “fear not for I bring you tidings of great joy…” only to pick the blanket back up after his recital. But he lays down the security blanket one more time, when he wraps the blanket around the base of Charlie Browns tree stating that perhaps it just needs a little extra love. This text seems appropriate for Christmas but for the season of advent we may be better suited to look at Luke 3 as we hear John the Baptist calling out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord.” This cry of preparation is one we often think about during Advent, and rightfully so because Advent is a time of anticipation and preparation.

This text seems appropriate for the season of Advent, but it may seem an odd one for a week in which we talk about peace. John the Baptist doesn’t encapsulate the image of Advent or Christmas peace that we usually picture. He’s depicted as a bit of a wild man, living in the wilderness, wearing strange clothes, eating odd things, and crying out to people to repent. When we think of Advent and Christmas peace, we usually picture babies who don’t cry and pastoral images of sheep with shepherds, not wild and loud calls for repentance. Join me as we share n the reading of our passage for this morning from Luke 3:1-6.

***Luke 3:1-6 NRSV*** *(1)In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, (2)during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (3)He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, (4)as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (5)Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; (6)and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

Here we find John the Baptist painting a picture of a time of peace; borrowed from the prophet Isaiah. He describes a time when crooked paths are made straight and rough places made smooth. It’s an image of the day of the Lord, a day longed for by the people, a day when all will be made right. A day of peace. But this picture of peace that John paints is not one of silent babies and softly bleating sheep; it’s a picture of a hard journey of work and repentance that ultimately leads to the peace of Christ. It’s the kingdom of God coming to earth in unexpected ways.

***THE TEXT BEGINS BY CONTRASTING THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD WITH THE KINGDOM OF GOD***. Luke sets the stage by describing the current kingdom and political powers at play. The list includes the emperor, the governor, various other political leaders, and even the religious high priests of the day. This is done to identify the people in charge because political/kingdom power was the avenue through which people thought the Messiah would come. They thought peace on earth would come through the powers of the elite: through warfare, through the law, or through having the most firepower and/or the most clout.

After this list of political rulers and powers comes a simple line in verse 2: “God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” This seemingly small line draws us into the story, it draws us in to see the very different kingdom God is creating. The kingdom of God is not entering through the political center but seems to be coming from a wilderness place. The kingdom of God is not entering through those with power but through a prophet with little clout.

Although Luke 3 doesn’t directly reference the birth of Christ, the immediately preceding chapter does, which means that this list of political leaders and powers—read directly after the narrative of Christ’s birth and childhood—highlights this contrast of kingdoms even more. God’s kingdom is not operating in the ways of the world with shows of military power, violence, money, or control; it is operating very differently.

***JOHN IS BAPTIZING PEOPLE INTO A NEW CITIZENSHIP.*** The hearers of the original text would have been familiar with the idea of baptism because converts to Judaism were baptized, and there were various religious ceremonies that involved cleansing with water.The radical part of John’s message wasn’t in the act of baptism but in what he was asking of those who came to be baptized. John called the people snakes (verse 7) and told them to stop relying on their heritage (verse 8) for salvation. He told them they needed to repent—to completely change their hearts and minds.

This act of repentance would lead to significant change in the ways people lived (see verses 11, 13, 14). This reorientation was not dependent on family legacy or heritage but was different altogether. When we look at the list of those who came to be baptized, we also see something interesting: in the crowd were tax collectors and soldiers. Tax collectors controlled much of the economy at the time, and were known to cheat people for personal gain. John commanded them to stop collecting dishonestly. Soldiers were the powerful arm of the Roman government, so when John commanded them to stop harassing others, he was asking people employed to be the violent instigators and force of Roman law to act in ways that instead humanized others. This contrast of the kingdoms of the earth to the kingdom of God is important to understand the ways in which God is seeking to bring peace on earth. It is clear that what John preached, and the ways people responded, were different from what people expected.

***A VOICE CALLING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, PATHS BEING MADE STRAIGHT, VALLEYS RAISED UP, AND MOUNTAINS MADE LOW IS A CALL TO ACTIVE AND DIFFICULT PEACEMAKING***. When we think of peace, we don’t usually imagine earthquakes, but that is the type of image we get from verse 5 in today’s scripture. Things are being shaken up. When we think of peace we don’t usually imagine sandpaper, but that is the type of image we get from verse 5 as well: the rough places will be made smooth. Things are being refined and smoothed out. These images of the kingdom of God—a kingdom of peace being brought about in the world—are ones of action and movement. It is obvious that the kingdom of God is not going to come in the ways people expected. We already noted that repentance and baptism are odd ways to build earthly kingdoms, which are usually formed by money, power, and control. But even so, the kingdom of God is not breaking through with gentleness. There is force, power, and movement behind the kingdom of God.

Peace is not passivity, and the peace of God is coming through in sometimes painful ways because the powers of the world have to be dismantled in order for peace to reign. We often speak of level playing fields for people, and this text is a great time to revisit that metaphor. When the ground isn’t level, that means injustice is happening, and where there is injustice, there cannot be peace. The kingdom of God creates a level playing field, which means justice for people. This is connected, as well, to John telling the crowds to share what they have with others, a message revisited by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. A kingdom of peace is one in which people have what they need and justice reigns.

Crooked paths being made straight might not mean much to us today with our modern travel technology, but the clarity and ability to see the way ahead—as opposed to risking the possibility of getting robbed by those hiding around bends—was an image early listeners would have understood instantly. A world where we don’t have to fear the bends in the road is very different from one in which soldiers could be hiding to harass us. This is also an important reference for the soldiers who ask John later in the chapter what they should be doing. Rough places being made smooth might be an image we can better grasp. We talk often about going through rough patches, or having a rough time. But we also have to note that the smoothing-out *process* is often not one of ease or comfort. A kingdom of peace is one that moves in action toward others, looking out for the interests of others, instead of solely ourselves. This type of peace is a painful process. It takes sacrifice, repentance, and a complete reorientation of life.

***THE GREAT HOPE OF THE INBREAKING KINGDOM OF GOD AS A KINGDOM-OF-PEACE WORK IS THAT IT ENTERS INTO THE WORLD THROUGH ORDINARY PEOPLE***. John the Baptist was not a ruler; he was a wild man in the wilderness preaching repentance and preparing a path for Christ. The crowds seeking baptism were ordinary people, like you and I, looking for more. The tax collectors were viewed as some of the worst sinners—yet they were called to a new way. The soldiers were caught up in the Roman Empire yet sought something new. Even the Messiah himself entered in an ordinary and unspectacular way. We too are called to this work—to repent and be transformed, that we might participate in the kingdom of God, in the kingdom of peace, and in the world around us.

We are called in may aspects to be peacemakers. But, peacemaking is not an easy task. It is not an image of babies who don’t cry or of sheep resting in quiet fields. It’s the image, instead, of a parent who breaks a cycle of abuse by doing the hard, smoothing work of therapy so that their child can grow up in a better home. It’s the image of civil-rights activists sitting at counters and singing “This Little Light of Mine.” It’s the grandmother on her knees night after night, praying for her neighborhood. It’s people who wash graffiti off walls without expecting or requesting recognition. It’s church members opening their homes in hospitality toward others. It’s the hard, everyday moments of working for justice in a world that is so far from it.

Rev. Olivia Metcalf says in *Come Peasant, King*, “The path toward peace isn’t easy. The path toward peace isn’t smooth. The path toward peace is risky, takes courage, and challenges the broken realities of the world. For peace to come, we must get to the hard work of aligning a world made crooked by sin with the straight paths of the kingdom of God. For peace to come, there is creative work that makes valleys of despair into mountaintops of hope. For peace to come, there is repetitive work that sands away injustice to bring about the smoothness of equity. Without the work, without the challenge, and without upsetting the status quo, peace will not come” (pp. 36-37).

And so we work. We work to see the kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven, and to see peace in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We work so that the world might know the ultimate peace that comes not from the kingdoms and powers of the world but from the very heart of God.