AN ANXIOUS PEACE
Scripture: Luke 1:68-69 and 3:1-6

FOCUS: We are those called to prophets of the Most High as was John, called to point to Jesus and when we so live we will come to know real peace.

As I thought about two seemingly unrelated themes for this morning, peace, the traditional focus for candle lighting on the second Sunday of Advent and the ministry of John the Baptist, the lectionary focus today, I had an epiphany of sorts, one of those light bulb moments. That is, in modern terms, really what the word epiphany means, an “ah ha” moment, that instant when some truth dawns on us. The epiphany that I had this this week came as the light dawned and revealed that perhaps what we are all called to be are modern day John the Baptists proclaiming the peace which comes when Jesus arrives and preparing the way for him to come.

I was quite literally a John the Baptist for about half my life. But now, as our next door neighbor sometimes reminds me, I am John the Methodist. As I thought about the call to be people of peace, and the call to be modern day John the Baptists, I was struck the magnitude of the challenge which is ours. We are called to be peacemakers in a world bent on self-destruction, hatred and conflict. We are called to prepare the way for the coming of Christ into a world that seems more and more disinterested in his presence. As I considered the magnitude of the task to which we are called, I asked myself, ***“How can we possibly live up to the calling, how can we possibly complete the task? How can we bring peace to a troubled world? How can we prepare the way for the coming of one so any seek to avoid?”*** As the light came on I came to realize that we cannot do it. So are we a people called to do the impossible?

No, not at all. God would never do that to us. Are we called to do the difficult, absolutely, but never called to do the impossible. We are called to be those who, like John, passionately point to the one who can do the impossible. It is our calling to point people to The Prince of Peace. It is our job to prepare the way for his coming into our rather chaotic world. It is our job, as was it John’s, to so live that we may be called prophets of the Most High. Ponder that for a moment. You are called to be prophets, every one of you. You are called, just as was John to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming.

There are some less than fully ethical folk out there who would have you believe they are today’s only real prophets of The Most High. They claim to have special access to God, special knowledge of what God has on God’s mind and what God plans to do. They are pretty good about reminding you of their lofty calling and of soliciting more than just your prayers in response to their self-proclaimed great wisdom. But these folks have little in common with John, that reclusive fellow who hung out in the wilderness dressed in animal skins, proclaiming a message which pointed folks away from him toward the one who was and is truly worthy of adoration. Were he to be around today John wouldn’t have a fancy car, or a state of the art television studio, or a private jet. He wouldn’t proclaim his message to huge crowds in massive stadiums. He would just humbly point those with whom he came in contact to Jesus and then go about living his modest, austere lifestyle.

That is the kind of prophetic voice of peace you and I are called to be. We are probably not going to be called to eat bugs dipped in honey as did John, and I am pretty certain God doesn’t expect any of us to wear only roughhewn garments of camel hair. But for John that was his way of life. It was comfortable and familiar and God used him right where he was in his own environment. John was proclaiming the message of forgiveness and offering baptism to those who came to him. His mission was to call for repentance. But John knew that repentance alone ws not enough, that rebirth would be required of those who truly sought to be people of God. So having baptized with water John proclaimed the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit, which would arrive with the advent of the one far greater than he, the one born of a humble carpenters wife, sent from God, the one to whom John pointed others

We read the response of Zechariah, John’s father, to having had his own epiphany. It was revealed to him, by the Holy Spirit, that his young son was to be someone special, a prophet of the Most High and he would be called to prepare the way for the coming messiah. We find the story of John’s birth and childhood only in the book of Luke. It is often recalled as we piece together the Christmas story. John’s story began, as did so many stories in scripture, with a godly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who wanted more than anything to have children, but who had been unsuccessful and who had lost hope. They were good people, he a priest and she a faithful wife from a priestly family. Luke says they were righteous and blameless before God. But their hearts were heavy for their biological clocks were telling them that the chances of having a family were now slim and none.

One day as he was on duty in the temple Zechariah was chosen by lot for the honor and sacred privilege of offering the incense. It was a high honor, generally offered only once in a lifetime. Zechariah humbly entered the sanctuary and began to perform his duty. As was the custom those gathered for worship were outside praying. Apparently at least some of them were aware of the dear priest’s burden and had been praying that Elizabeth would overcome all the obstacles which seemed to render childbirth at this late stage an impossibility. Suddenly a messenger from God appeared standing just to the right of the altar. As would I be if an angel appeared out of the blue there by the altar this morning, Zechariah was terrified.

Then came those ironic first words from the angel. ***“Don’t be afraid!”*** Imagine your response. I suspect in his mind that dear priest reacted more or less as would we. ***“Don’t be afraid? I have no clue what is going on here! I just came to perform my sacred duty and to honor God and you show up. What are you here for”.***  Then came that improbable response. ***“Your wife, Elizabeth is going to have a son, and you are going to name him John.”***  The angel went on to offer more details, apparently the child was going to be offered up to service of God as a Nazarite, for the angel opined that the one to be born would never taste strong drink and we will later find him with the uncut hair of that rite. The angel spoke of joy and gladness of a special place in God’s site, of a successful ministry leading others to the Lord.

Zechariah responded much as I would have. ***“So how do you think this is going to happen? I’m old, Elizabeth is old, we desperately wanted children all our married life and could not conceive during our youthful years, during the normal time of child birth. So what makes you think it can happen now? It just isn’t in the cards.”***  Big mistake. The kind I often make. God’s messenger didn’t offer Zechariah some options, he simply told him what ws going to be, but the dear priest couldn’t come to accept it.

 Now I am not implying that Gabriel has ever come to visit me in person. And I certainly hope he is not about to show up and tell me Kathy is expecting. We don’t plan on having a nursery in the new house. But there have been more times than I like to admit when I have received clear messages from God but either because I didn’t like the message or because, as was the case with Zechariah, I just couldn’t believe it was true, I didn’t accept it . It might have been in a word one of you spoke to me or as a fleeting thought that just keep reappearing. Sometimes it has been one of those so called coincidences which were really something much more. At other times it has been in the words of scripture or the writings of the spiritual masters or even something posted on social media. You see God speaks a lot, in many different ways. And what God says is often amazing and unexpected, so we may well choose to question or even ignore the message. And when we do there are consequences.

There were definitely consequences for Zechariah. I like the way the relatively new Common English Bible translates Gabriel’s response***.  “I am Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. 20Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”*** In The Message Gabriel’s response concludes ***“Every word I’ve spoken to you will come true on time—God’s time.”*** Talk about consequences! The good priest was to be mute for somewhere in the neighborhood of nine months, from that moment until the baby was born.

Zechariah was truly a faithful priest. Despite all the confusion which must have accompanied his encounter in the temple and the fact that he was now unable to speak, he remained and served out the term of his active duty in and around the temple. Then he returned home and sure enough Elizabeth conceived. Elizabeth was overcome with joy. The disgrace she had endured for decades, the emptiness which had all but consumed her was finally gone, and she was going to have a son. So relieved and thankful was Elizabeth that she went into seclusion for five months.

In the meantime her cousin, Mary was also visited by that pesky Gabriel and had, like Zechariah, been given incredible news. The idea of a barren woman of Elizabeth’s age being with child was difficult enough for folks to understand, but Mary faced an even more incomprehensible message, she would also have a child, a son destined for unimaginable greatness, and the father would be the Holy Spirit. Mary was told of the impending birth at her cousin’s house and was encouraged by Gabriel to go see for herself what God could do. She went and stayed three months, two special women sharing special times. You may recall that apparently John somehow recognized the wonder of the moment when Mary arrived for scripture tells us that he leaped in the womb. Comforted by her time with Elizabeth Mary returned home. Soon Elizabeth gave birht

Being faithful parents Elizabeth and Zechariah took John to the temple to be circumcised when he was eight days old. It was while there that Zechariah was again able to speak and there that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he offered poetic words of praise and joy. In his words we find that tie between John and the message of peace. The overjoyed father understands the nature of the mission which would fall to his son. He proclaims the good news that John will be the one to go before the Lord and to prepare the way for his coming. He proclaims, concerning the one for whom his son will make preparation, that ***“The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and to guide us to peace.”*** John was born to announce the coming of the one who would bring a message of peace.

The Magaan family reminded us as they lit the candle of peace that God’s ways are not our ways. They offered these words of Jesus about this matter of peace. ***“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid.”*** So what is this other worldly peace, how can it be ours and what ought we to do with it? God’s peace is difficult to define. It comes in different ways to each of us and manifests itself differently as well. It is a bit easier to say what it is not. God’s peace is not the absence of all pain and suffering in this life, and that is good news, for we will all know our share of both. The best I can do to define it is to say it is a sense of wellbeing in all circumstances, trusting that God is now and forever faithful and is able to work through us for good no matter what.

So how do we find God’s peace? It comes as we offer ourselves completely and without reservation to God. It comes as we die to self so that we might live for him. It comes as we recognize that we are creatures, here by the grace of a loving creator for the purpose of honoring God and sharing God’s love and grace with a world which, as we have seen again this week is in dire need of both love and grace.

But simply obtaining that peace for ourselves is not enough. Indeed if we truly understand the nature of this remarkable peace we will discover that it is an anxious peace, a peace which cannot sit still. Godly peace does calm our spirits as we travel the hills and valleys of life, but it also challenges us to be about that prophetic work of preparing the way for the Most High God. When we hear talk of filling valleys and taking down mountains and hills, of making crooked paths straight and rough ways smooth, we can’t help but be a bit taken aback. ***“Me, do that, you must be kidding.”*** But I proclaim to you that just as we are all call to be prophets we are all called to the ministry of taking down, filling up and straightening out whatever impedes the coming of Christ into the lives of those around us.

I am convinced that our calling is actually less incredible than it might seem. To be sure we can’t literally move mountains or relocate highways, at least not without some pretty heavy equipment. But we can do some significant taking down, filling and straightening in our lives so that the way might be prepared for Christ to come into our homes, our towns, our schools and our businesses. We can tear down the mountains of mean-spiritedness and hatred, we can fill the emptiness of self-gratification with a spirit of service, we can straighten out the winding paths of our wandering minds and focus on the voice of God which is so often drowned out by our addiction to distraction. And when we do these things we are becoming prophets and we are preparing the way for the Lord to come into our homes, our community, our schools and our businesses.

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table I offer some challenging words from Alfred Delp which I think define this peace which passes understanding. He writes, ***“If we want Advent to transform us – our homes and hearts, and even nations – then the great question for us is whether we will come out of the convulsions of our time with this determination: Yes, arise! It is time to awaken from sleep. A waking up must begin somewhere. It is time to put things back where God intended them. It is time for each of us to go to work – certain that the Lord will come – to set our life in God’s order wherever we can.”***

Time to wake up. Time to put things back where God intended them. Sounds a bit like tearing down, filling up and straightening out. That is what Delp sought to do. Sounds like a formula for peace and that what it was for Delp even as he was put to death by the Nazis when he refused to renounce his beloved Jesuit order in exchange for freedom. What an example.

For your sake for the sake of the one whose way we are called to make straight and for the sake of those to whom he would come, may we strive to be so faithful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN