Sermon for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

January 10, 2021

When we went to church the weekend after the attacks on September 11th, I hoped to hear the pastor offer some words that would help me make sense of what had happened.

He began his sermon by saying something to the effect of, “if you’ve come to hear me tell you something to make sense of what happened this week, I’m sorry to tell you I’m probably not going to be very helpful.”

What he did offer was a message of hope and peace, rooted in faith in God.

I’d forgotten about that until this week, when I began to wonder what I could possibly say to help all of you make sense of what happened in our nation’s capital this past week. I have a much better understanding now of why he started his sermon as he did.

I probably can’t help you make sense of the acts of violence that happened on Wednesday, or the events leading up to them. But perhaps that’s not my task here.

What I *can* do, I hope, is offer you a message of comfort, and a reminder that even in the darkest of times, the light continues to shine.

Every year on January 6th, whether it falls on a Sunday or not, the church celebrates the festival of Epiphany, the official end of the season of Christmas.

On that day, those of us who are pedantic about such things, finally move our magi into the nativity scene, remembering those who had seen the light in the sky and followed it to offer gifts and worship the true Light which had come into the world. The light which shines in the darkness and brings life to all who believe.

As I drove home after visiting with the quilters on Wednesday morning, I realized that I forgot to actually put up my nativity scene, so I didn’t need to worry about moving the magi closer.

And then I learned of the chaos unfolding in our nation’s capital.

As I watched the news, I was in a daze. I could not comprehend what was going on. I haven’t felt like that since I watched the news one early morning in September 2001.

As I tried to process what I saw, the words of Genesis 1 came to mind. Before God created plants or animals or humans, before God created the stars in the heavens, God had to first create order out of chaos.

Only once God separated light and darkness, only once God gathered the waters in one place and allowed dry land to appear, only then could God begin to create.

And what God created, God called good. And that includes all of humanity, created in God’s image.

It is hard for us to create good in the midst of chaos.

For millennia, people have looked for ways to create peace. Many have tried force. The Roman Empire into which Jesus was born collapsed in part because it had grown so large it could no longer enforce peace through military might.

Some have sought ways to isolate themselves from others who are different, who don’t believe as they do, working to achieve peace in their little corner of the world.

I don’t think we can use either of those methods to create peace, though. Violence begets violence, whether the it takes the form of words or actions. Fighting each other does not lead to peace. It’s only when we agree to stop fighting, when we come together to seek a path away from violence, a path forward to something better, that we can create peace.

Nor does isolation or ridding ourselves of those who are different bring lasting peace. It’s hard to have abundant life when you choose a path that requires constant vigilance against any kind of thinking that might challenge what’s accepted as right.

Seeking uniformity denies who God created us to be. As St. Paul reminds us, each of us has been given a different set of gifts to be used for the common good.[[1]](#footnote-1) Over and over, St. Paul warned us to not allow our differences to divide us, and to seek not uniformity, but unity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God gave us the tools to create peace. It’s up to us to choose to use them.

At the root of all the things that keep us from using those tools, from seeking peace, is fear.

Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unloved. Fear of feeling irrelevant. Fear of not living up to someone else’s expectations of us. Fear of not having power over others. Fear that someone might be better than us, have better things than us, have more than us.

All of those lead us to the sins of greed and pride and jealousy and hate. They lead us to act in ways that are not in keeping with the teachings of Christ, acts like what we saw this past week.

They keep us from being at peace.

A few months ago, I told you about the life-changing work that’s being done at a girl’s home in Texas. Part of that work is teaching the girls to stop hugging the grudges they carry with them.

It’s only once we let go of the anger and hurt and fear that we hold in our hearts that we can grow. It’s only once we let go of all of those things that we can know peace.

They teach the girls to be able to express their fears and anger and hurt in safe ways, rather than destructive ways, because only then can the girls move forward and create better lives for themselves.

Clinging to our anger and fear is like hugging a grudge. It leads us on destructive paths. When we’re busy hugging anger or fear, we cannot know peace, because peace and fear cannot occupy the same heart.

The Bible is our handbook for peace. The the 10 Commandments, the Great Commandment, the teachings of Christ, are our guide for creating peace. And the Bible makes it clear that peace of God cannot exist without justice for ***all*** people.

Peace can’t come by force. It can’t come in the face of intimidation or violence or hate. We cannot be bullied into peace.

Peace requires agape love, a deep, abiding, active concern for the well-being of others. Peace requires agape love for those who are different from us, those who suffer, those who are denied justice, and, yes, even those who seek to harm us.

People tried to use force to stop Jesus from delivering that message.

It didn’t work.

Through Christ, God repudiated the powers of evil, the powers of fear and darkness. At our baptisms, we repudiate all of the forces that separate us from God. And then we hear the good news that we are God’s beloved children; that we are forgiven, not just once, but always.

And then we are invited into the redeeming work God is doing, creating peace and order out of chaos.

God has given us the tools to create peace. May we have hearts free from the fears that keep us from using those tools.

1. 1 Corinthians 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans 3:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-11;Galatians 3:27-29 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)