

## Growing in Peace

Sermon 40 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11: 1-10 & Matthew 3: 1-13

In 1836 Samuel Colt patented his first percussion revolver called "The Paterson." It was named for the New Jersey town in which its prototype was forged by John Pearson. In the 1840s the design was improved by Texas Ranger Captain Samuel Walker, who made it easier to use in the field. From the 1830s to 1870s Colt's company responded to complaints about the weakness of the "open top" pistol, and finally produced a gun that would pack a serious punch while still offering the revolving cylinder. This improved model was the .45-caliber Colt Single Action Army.

By 1873 the United States Army had grown fond of the revolver and ordered 8,000 of them to arm its soldiers. Over the next two decades, 30,000 additional Single Action Army revolvers were purchased as the gun became a necessity and a trademark of American warfare and western colonial expansion.

The success of the Colt Single Action Army revolver was not limited to its military use. Just one year after the army ordered its first batch of these legendary revolvers, Cincinnati gun dealer Benjamin Kittredge & Company began marketing the pistol to the public, this time with the legendary name, "The Peacemaker."<sup>i</sup>

The Peacemaker quickly became a hero of the Wild West. It was loved by lawmen, outlaws, scouts, and cowboys who relied on the gun's power, ease, and accuracy for their survival.<sup>ii</sup> Fans of outlaws and old western films should know it well as it was known to have been carried by Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Butch Cassidy, Bat Masterson, Ben Daniels, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday... to name a few. In fact, this gun was so integral to the growth of the United States in the late 18- and early 1900s, (and in the stories that we would tell about that era) that when it wasn't referred to as the "Peacemaker," it was commonly known as "the gun that won the West."<sup>iii</sup>

Despite the success and seemingly unquestioned American love for the Colt revolver, as I read the Gospel and prepare for the arrival of the Christ child this season, I have to wonder if this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Today's Gospel reading is a traditional reading for the second Sunday of Advent. It is one that is often coupled with the "Prophet's candle" which calls us to remember the prophets who foretold the coming of the Christ child who would be known as the Prince of Peace. Matthew not only quotes Isaiah, the prophet of Israel, but he establishes John the Baptist as the new authoritative prophet. Matthew's description of John cites the words of Isaiah, but invokes the memory of the prophet Elijah. Both John and Elijah are creatures of wilderness. Unlike Isaiah who had access to power, who lived and worked in and around the palace, who spoke God's word to Kings. John (like Elijah) is dressed in the clothing of the poor, made of camels hair, tied with a leather belt. His diet is the diet of the poor,

consisting of locusts and wild honey, probably because that is all that is available outside of town and outside of community.

In the ancient world everything happened in the cities and towns. There was a centralization of power, of government, of religious and social life that only took place in the heart of communities. People would travel in, toward the center to pay taxes, to worship, and to accomplish whatever else needed to get done. Rarely would groups gravitate outward. So, it seems strange to find a prophet – at least one hoping to be effective – preaching on the margins, coming from the wilderness... and it seems even more strange that the people of Jerusalem and Judea were going out to him. Their movement is in the opposite direction than one might expect.

Meeting John in Matthew's Gospel, we may recall that Elijah, too, had a journey away from town and into the wilderness. In deep frustration, in a moment of utter despair, fearing for his life, Elijah runs away, into the wilderness and winds up in a cave on Mount Horeb. It is in that cave that he meets God in the sound of sheer silence.

And remembering Elijah's divine encounter there on Horeb, we might also remember that is the same place, the same wilderness mountain, upon which Moses received the Torah Law which would become our ten commandments. All of a sudden, the wilderness, with all its wilderness prophets seems to be the place where God lives and moves and speaks to and through the prophets.

So here we are near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, meeting a new wilderness prophet. If we didn't already know how the story would unfold, we might expect that God was about to meet with John, give him a message, and send him into Jerusalem to speak to Herod's delegation. But that is not what happens. It seems (and we would confirm later if we were to keep on reading) that John has already met with God and received his divine baptism. John has already received his message and is ready to deliver it directly to the people of Judea. But rather than going back into the center of social, political, and religious life John proclaims his message on the margins. It is as if his proclamation can best be heard away from the social order, the political structure, and the religious institution that dominate the imperial culture.

John's proclamation from the wilderness is not only abnormal, but it poses a direct threat to the establishment and the power dynamic of the city. There, the religious institutions, that would normally call for the confession of sin, repentance, and offer baptism, were in collaboration with Herod's rule. There were mutual understandings of how the social and economic order would be maintained and how political and religious leaders could co-exist, compromising the ethics of God for the ethics of empire. All to keep the peace of the city.

So, John's arrival just outside the city, proclaiming the need for repentance and offering a wilderness baptism causes alarm because it threatens Herod's way of peace, Roman

peace, and suggests that God's peace might grow without the Roman army, without the Roman economy, without the Roman hierarchy, and without Roman rule. John's arrival suggests that God's peace might grow on the margins.

Not only would God's peace grow from the margins, but it would also look completely different than the peace the Romans offered. Theirs was a peace won by military conquest and suppression of difference. It was a peace that was delicately held in balance with a specific economic and social hierarchy in which everyone knew their place and where no one questioned authority. It was a peace born of violence and submission.

While our experiences may not feel so similar to what we know about the Roman empire and life in the ancient world, our understanding of peace is not much different than theirs. Our imaginations struggle to understand models of peace-making that do not require violence or at least the possibility for violence to erupt. We use military force to establish and maintain peace abroad. We arm ourselves with military-style weapons to ensure that peace is kept in our cities. We cannot seem to imagine another way of peace-making, other than those that are set up by centralized government and trusted to uphold the laws of the land. This is the peace we know.

I suppose there is another kind of peace that we strive for, one that comes from our enlightened minds... one we call inner peace. We spend our early years building a life for ourselves, establishing our relationship with God, earning degrees, starting careers, choosing spouses and maybe even starting a family. All of these are the tried and true ways to build a life full of peace, happiness and fulfillment. But how often do our friends and family members... perhaps even ourselves, fall short of that goal of inner peace? We can achieve stability, we can create relative security, we can even go through the motions of a well-lived life... but all too often we struggle for true inner peace.

Maybe there's a third kind of peace that we should name today: relational or interpersonal peace. This third kind is even more elusive than inner peace because it is most possible when we are at peace with ourselves. When we find our own peace, we can see others for who they are, without jealousy, without fear, without judgment, without competition. We can practice the self-emptying love that Jesus taught us with his life and ministry.

This is the kind of peace that John foretells, the kind of peace for which Isaiah cries out "prepare!" This is the kind of peace foretold by Isaiah's famous words:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them...

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;

the lion shall eat straw like the ox...

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain...

This is a peace that surpasses our human understanding and one that requires us to turn from our old belief that violence could ever bring about peace, and turn toward the prophet on the margin who is calling us to repent. To turn, to reorient our lives away from the ways of Herod, away from the militarism of Rome, and... away from the powers of this world looking instead toward the Prince of Peace who came into this world once under questionable circumstances and who will come again in similar fashion.

Throughout Christian history there are records of brave men and women who experienced true repentance, who encountered God directly or through a prophet, like John the Baptist. And these men and women, having seen the light, turned their lives from the violence of this world to the vulnerability of the babe who came to save us from it.

We all remember Saul, the Gentile working for Rome who was walking the Damascus road, on his way to arrest and imprison members of the early church who were perpetuating Jesus' message after his death on the cross. The book of Acts describes Paul's mission to bring them back to Rome to face judgment when he was stopped cold in his tracks by the Spirit of God. He was struck blind for three days and when his sight returned, he knew he had to change his ways of thinking, of living, and of peacemaking. He knew that simply arresting the members of the early church and bringing them back to Jerusalem to face the justice of Rome would never create the peace that the empire so confidently offered.

We find ourselves in a world that offers all kinds of solutions for creating and keeping peace. Yet true peace that includes global peace, inner peace, interpersonal peace, and most of all peace with God seems to elude us. So perhaps it is time for us to turn around, to leave behind the "peacemakers" that are born of war and violence and self-preservation...

Maybe this is our repentance?

Maybe this season, we might turn from the centers of worldly power, that are promised and imposed by the Herods of today; and as we turn we might pray that our hearts be converted to new ways of peacemaking.

Ways that start with risk instead of self-protection...

Ways that choose listening to our neighbors rather than assuming they are out to get us...

Ways that understand that peace of any kind (inner, global, or relational) cannot be achieved with the heroes or weapons of the Wild West...

Maybe we can repent and turn to accept a new understanding that peace is not possible without the same level of vulnerability modeled by Jesus, who is named the Prince of Peace.

Perhaps today on this second Sunday of Advent, when we look at the flame of the Prophets' Candle, we might remember John and Isaiah and Ezekiel who call us into the margins... and perhaps we could remember Paul as well, who called us to repent... turning away from the peacemakers of this world and toward the Peace of the babe lying in a manger.

According to the Gospel, if we want to grow in peace, it all starts there.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a23685/colt-single-action/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a23685/colt-single-action/>

<sup>iii</sup> Information about the "Peacemaker" was pulled from multiple websites, citing information mainly from <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/02/25/colt-peacemaker/> and <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a23685/colt-single-action/>