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December 7, 2025
Malachi 3:1-6a & Matthew 3:1-12
Prophetic Peace

The Gospel of Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus – who his people were, as they would say in the South. This is followed by the birth and infancy narratives, with a focus on Joseph. Following the Holy Family's sojourn as refugees in Egypt, they return to their hometown of Nazareth. The action in Matthew's Gospel then jumps thirty some years to the heralding of Jesus' ministry by the prophetic words of John the Baptist. Hear now those words of challenge from Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.' "

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When we hear today's date December 7, the first thing that may pop into our mind is President Franklin Roosevelt's speech following the bombing of Pearl Harbor:

"Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The United States was at peace with that Nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its Government and its Emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific."¹

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/winter/crafting-day-of-infamy-speech.html>

The first draft of the speech began "Yesterday, December seventh, 1941, a date which will live in world history," was modified in subsequent drafts to the language we are familiar with today. On the National Archives website you can see Roosevelt's edits in his own handwriting, changing "live in world history" to "live in infamy." With a single word switch, Roosevelt signified that the date was more than just one where a historic event occurred, it was a date that would become infamous for the shocking and tragic events that unfolded. December 7 would be henceforth have a negative connotation attached to it, a date associated with war.

Thirty-one years later, there was a redemption of the date. On December 7, 1972, astronaut Harrison "Jack" Schmitt took a photo as the Apollo 17 spacecraft was heading toward the moon. This photo, known as the Blue Marble, was one of the first clear images of the whole Earth. Since the sun was directly behind the camera the entire face of the planet was lit up in brilliant blue, white, brown, and green. The astronauts were 28,000 miles away when they took the shot. As of today, Schmitt is that last person to have walked on the moon and that mission was the last time human beings were that far away from the Earth.² In a delightful interview you can watch on YouTube, Schmitt, who was a geologist by training, shared that the Blue Marble photo was one of a series of photos he took because of his interest weather patterns. This photo was not just breathtaking in its beauty. It also had an impact on how people viewed our planet. It confirmed the idea put forth some 25 years earlier by astronomer Fred Hoyle, who said: "Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from the outside, is available — once the sheer isolation of the Earth becomes plain — a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose."³ The Blue Marble photo was a key factor in birthing the environmental movement.

A new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose. This is where we find ourselves on the Second Sunday of Advent. Malachi and John the Baptist are speaking into a time of peril, a time when empires had ability to change the course of your life in the blink of an eye, days of infamy. Matthew's Gospel was written in a time of military occupation, from the perspective of an oppressed people under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

And into the empire two prophets speak to the possible: that there will be one who will come who will call us to repentance for our waywardness and sinful ways, one who will purify and refine the people. One that will bring peace. True peace. Not the false peace of an empire, a peace that relies on authoritarianism to keep the people in their place, quiet, subservient, unwilling or unable to resist. This is what the Pax Romana was – a period from roughly 27 BCE to 180 CE⁴ - when the vast Roman Empire was viewed as stable and peaceful from the outside because people dared not color outside the lines. This was a time of imperialism and empire, which encompassed Jesus' life and the writing of the Gospel of Matthew, and a defining moment for the Hebrew people was the destruction of the Temple by the Roman Empire, that great Temple rebuilt during the time of Malachi. So much for peace.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blue_Marble; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA7UlfEASz4&t=1149s>

³ <https://www.thespacereview.com/article/3470/1>; longnow.org/ideas/whole-earth-overview-effect

⁴ <https://www.studentsofhistory.com/the-pax-romana>

The authors of our Advent liturgy, *Illustrated Ministry* note, that “Empire offers peace that pacifies, not peace that liberates. In contrast, John proclaims that real peace demands preparation: a reorientation of hearts, systems, and society. His imagery is fiery and raw—a winnowing fork, an axe at the root—because the kind of change he calls for is costly. It disturbs complacency, reveals complicity, and refuses performative religion.”⁵

Malachi likewise speaks to the work that needs to be done. Malachi predicts the arrival of a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. This is understood to be John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus Christ. Malachi acknowledges that this one who prepares the way will bring challenge: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” Malachi’s imagery is as dramatic as John the Baptist’s – that of a refiner’s fire that purifies. This refining fire is an act of justice. It is not a punishment, rather like many wildfires it allows the dead chaff to burn off and new life emerge. As Jerusalem is being rebuilt, those practices of the past that led to economic and social injustice are cleared away, and a new Jerusalem is birthed, transforming individuals and systems into vehicles of God’s justice and peace.

A prophetic peace. This prophetic peace “asks of us more than comfort—it asks for courage to speak truth, to confront injustice masked as civility, and to prepare our communities for a peace that dismantles and rebuilds.” Because as the words of preparation in our bulletin share: “...peace is not the outcome of one person’s power or one group’s control. Peace is the ongoing labor of all God’s people. And the first step in that labor is the reorientation of our minds and the refining of our purposes. We are reminded, once again, of Martin Luther King Jr.’s words: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”⁶

Malachi and John the Baptist call us out to change our minds and our actions. Repentance has two faces – to move from the thoughts and behaviors that separate us from God and each other and then to shift and reorient towards God, to draw near to God’s heart for all creation. John reminds us that we will be judged by the fruits of our repentance. We cannot rely on our membership in a particular religious organization nor the particulars of our heritage. What matters is what we do. Do we uphold practices of injustice that prevent others from experiencing shalom – harmony and wholeness and peace? Or do we seek to call out the unjust behavior of the empire, to work for empowerment of voices silenced, to welcome all, wherever they might have called home in the past, whoever they might love, however they might identify to the table of grace from which we feast? What do we need to let go of – what chaff needs to be burned away – so that we might promote God’s Kingdom of Peace? Our apathy? Our privilege? Our anxieties and fears? What others might think of us?

This past Tuesday, our regional Presbytery, the Presbytery of Lake Michigan voted to take a stand on an issue facing our world today – that of Christian Nationalism. We – that is the

⁵ Illustrated Ministry. *The Will to Dream. Commentary & Preaching Guide*. illustratedministry.com

⁶ Rev. Dr. Jeehei Park, *Illustrated Ministry Commentary*

Presbytery – we will be a concurring Presbytery to bring an overture to the upcoming General Assembly this summer. The General Assembly is the policy making organization for the PC(USA). It is composed of elected ministers and elders, in equal numbers, who meet every two years and decide on issues big and small. This group will vote to approve or not approve the document *Repudiating Christian Nationalism and Affirming Our Faith Commitments*.

As a reminder, Christian Nationalism is not about loving our country or about patriotism. “Christian Nationalism is a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian identity with American civic life and national identity. It asserts that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should continue to be governed according to what its proponents see as Christian values or biblical principles...U.S. laws and policies should reflect narrowly defined Christian beliefs and Christianity should have a privileged place in public life.⁷ Regardless of your political leanings, Christian Nationalism distorts our theology and our Christian witness. As the rationale for the overture states: “It is a heresy that elevates nation, race and political authority above the sovereignty of God. It replaces the gospel of Jesus with a counterfeit religion of power and exclusion...”⁸

The repudiating Christian Nationalism overture calls us to repent in our broadest understanding of repentance – to turn away from this harmful belief system and turn toward the kingdom of peace and justice for all people. It calls out that Christian Nationalism is incompatible with the gospel as scripture reveals God’s Kingdom to be a kingdom of love and justice, not domination; Jesus brings good news to the poor and liberation to the oppressed; God calls us to justice, kindness, and humility and the greatest commandment is love of God and neighbor. This is what peace looks like.

Friends, we have a holy longing for peace. Hearts are weary, and souls unsettled, and people of all perspectives are searching—not just for answers, but for understanding, healing, hope and peace. From this longing comes the *will to dream*—a persistent courage to imagine, resist, and rebuild a better world. This is why we light the candle of peace each Advent season. We need a reminder that peace is not simply the absence of conflict. It is the promotion of justice. It is the practice of shalom. It is the work that calls us to think of our planet as the Blue Marble and embrace that a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose with the birth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Prince of Peace, the fulfillment of a prophetic peace. May it be so. Amen.

⁷ <https://pcusa.org/resource/confronting-white-christian-nationalism>

⁸ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gyWEkyptVFhD8wqGMKy9SiO-HHm3h7iR>