

Binkley Baptist Church

“Advent Sign-age: Peace”

Advent II

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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To be honest with you, I don't feel like hearing a lot of words today. Or certainly speaking many words today. We've had another week of more moral outrage and national disgrace. Like you I'm sick of and sickened by violence done in the name of God, violence and systemic cover-ups on our city streets, and violence done by masquerading public servants and preachers.

Words today will only take us so far. What in God's name is happening to us? There's more agony in Advent than adoration for me this season, more distress than decoration. I don't think I'm alone either.

San Bernadino joins Paris, Beirut, Syria, Colorado Springs, ad nauseum. And 14 dead there join their names to LaQuan MacDonald's name, Garrett Sweasy's name (the Colorado policeman), and—because his name has never and will never leave me, Pastor and public servant Clementa Pinkey of Mother Emmanuel AME, Charleston.

And today of all days is Peace Sunday. Peace—not simply the absence of violence—but shalom that heals and makes us whole, peace that allows the wolf to live with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, peace that allows a little child to lead the people and restore them to full communion with God. Peace that ensures no more hurting or destruction on God's holy mountain.

Does the world today—this morning—feel like that kind of peaceful place? Need that kind of peace, yes. Feel that way...I'm doubtful. Advent won't allow us to wallow in sentimentality because we proclaim that into a very broken world the Christ-child is to come. The late psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen had a theory that there are times in any society when anxiety peaks. At such times terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and political toxicity infect all of society. It's as if he write that this morning with all of the polarizing rhetoric going on in our land.

The text today—Luke 1:68-79—is known as the Benedictus. A song, a hymn of praise and prophecy envisioning an unfathomable, creation-healing shalom of God. And the prophecy is spoken by an old man dreaming a dream for his boy, his son, and the role he will play in that redemptive drama.

Fathers and sons this Advent Sunday

Zechariah and John.

Luke starts his gospel off with an old priest named Zechariah. Before Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it's John, Elizabeth, and Zechariah. News comes from Gabriel to Zechariah that his wife's barrenness will end, and they'll be given a child, a son. He's in disbelief and fear and questions how this can be (echoes Old Testament: stories and foreshadows a story a little later.) News like that can bring Advent fear/anxiety more than holiday merriment.

Gabriel assures him that his boy's birth will bring joy and gladness, that John (he's to name the boy John) will turn many people to the Lord. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Again Zechariah asks: How will I know? I'm old and she is too, he says.

Gabriel, now agitated, says: because you don't trust and believe my words, which will be fulfilled, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day is fulfilled. So the whole of Elizabeth's pregnancy her husband can't talk. Now that's a Christmas present for every expectant mother! You can't order that at Babies-R-Us. He is unable to speak. No words. Zechariah is reduced to making signs to communicate. And, I think, ponders all these things Gabriel has told him about his son. The day of the circumcision (8th day, the naming) arrives and the boy was going to be named after Zechariah. But Elizabeth objected.

Zechariah asks for a writing table and wrote: "His name is John." Immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

The biblical text says that fear came over all their neighbors. Can you imagine trying to interpret what in the world just occurred? Vacillating between adoration and agony, distress and devotion, is an Advent dilemma. Then the song pours forth from the old man which is both praise to God and an outline of his son's job description.

Tom Wright says that "often it's the old people the ones who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumor of home...Zechariah is someone who has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and who now finds the two bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son."

John will grow up and preach, of course, repentance—a turning toward righteousness and justice, forgiveness of sins. He will offer cleansing baths of baptismal renewal to symbolize the turning, our very practice to this day. And it is marked by peace. The father dreams of a world where his son will play a role in the shalom, the peace of the world.

By the tender mercy
of our God,
The dawn from on high
will break upon us,

to give light to those who
sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death
to guide our feet into the way of peace
(Luke 1: 78-79)

In Lynchburg, Va. last week after the terror in California a preacher's son spoke words reminiscent of his father's own words. Jerry Falwell Jr. told his Liberty University Community that:

"if some of those people in that community center had what I have in my back pocket right now...I've always thought that if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in and killed them."

Cue applause and wild cheers. That hateful choir is growing, you know.

Where's Jesus? No words about guiding feet in the ways of peace, just pack heat.

In Paris after the attacks there was a new report—it went viral—of a journalist who interviewed a father and his six-year-old son at one of the makeshift memorials. Did you see it? The worried child expressed fear and the need to move because of the guns—too many guns in the hands of the bad guys he said. We saw the tender touch between the loving father and his little boy, the boy's arm draped around his Dad's neck. The father told him to look at all the people bringing flowers and laying them down as tribute and to look at all the candles bringing light. "The flowers and the candles are here to protect us," the father said. No words from this Dad about concealed carry. He signals to his boy

paths of peace. Will fear and anxiety in Advent lead to more violence or peaceful paths? Words of retribution or signs of peace?

We say this very table is a sign, a sign of peace. The New Testament passage from Ephesians says it so well: "for he (Jesus) is our peace...he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near." And when Jesus could have fought against the powers of darkness and hate he didn't. And when those who followed him tried to fight he said, "Put that sword away---that's not my way." Take swords and handguns out of our hands and put peace in them. Has there ever been a more urgent need than now for that to take hold?

Put peace into each other's hands. In Advent we wait and work. We light our candles and place our poinsettias as signs of peace.

"A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and branch shall grow out of his roots."

Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom begins with those very words.

On that day the root of Jesse will stand as a sign to the peoples. Lo, how a rose. Like the Parisian father said to his son, "look at the flowers, look at the candles." Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.