

Luke 1:68-79

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us

that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

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.”*

Dawn from On High - December 5, 2021

Luke 1:68-79

This week, our Advent wreath celebrates Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Peace is unquestionably something we all need. We need peace in our daily lives. We need peace in our families. As the “great resignation” continues, clearly we want peace in our workplaces. As the murders in Philadelphia top 500 people, we need peace in our cities. As the number of COVID deaths in our nation tops 600,000 we need peace in so many overflowing ICUs. As the political debate intensifies between the two parties, we need peace in our nation. And as threats of war from Russian and China escalate, we need peace in our world.

Jesus is the bearer of peace, yet we see precious little peace in our world today. We are tired of endless conflict, aren't we? We are tired of hearing of the latest school shooting or questionable trial verdict. We all want it all stop, go away, and just leave us alone for a while.

Yet despite the universal craving for peace, it seems we are being driven apart from each other. The lack of peace in our world extends to a lack of trust or support for each other. The vaccination debate in our country has only exacerbated our mutual mistrust. Whether you got the shot or not, it is easy to question the motivations behind people getting the vaccine or not. If I can't trust my neighbor to get a vaccine that will help protect me, how do I really trust him or her about anything? On the other hand people who refuse to get vaccinated may regard those who do with suspicion, wondering why they would do something as dangerous as getting “the jab.” I mean, as that thinking goes, if someone's judgement is so poor as to get something as risky as a COVID vaccine, what other parts of their judgement are lacking? How can the vaccinated trust the unvaccinated about anything and vice versa?

When we can't trust each other, friends, then the cornerstone of human relationships disappears. And that cornerstone is community.

It is through the idea of community that God is seeking to rebuild the world and I fear we are retreating rapidly from what it means to be in community with one another. Increasingly, it seems our motto is everyone person for themselves. There is an obsession with doing what is best for ourselves and not caring about others. Look at the debate over Covid vaccinations. I cannot understand why anyone would not want to get one — not just for the protection it provides to us, but because it stops the virus from spreading to others. But many disagree.

So far, I hope, no one has questioned the idea of requiring every driver to have insurance before they can go out on the road. If you crash into me, I want to know that you can pay for the damages you caused. That seems only reasonable. So far, no state has reversed the requirement that all school children are vaccinated against smallpox, TB, polio, whooping cough, and other childhood diseases. I don't want my children getting them and I don't want mine to spread them to yours.

And that's the point of community, isn't it? I don't want anything bad to happen to me, but at the same time, I don't want anything bad to happen to you, if I have the power to prevent it. Is this not merely an extension of Jesus' teaching that we should do unto others as we would have others do to us?

But when we don't care for our neighbors, when we don't care about our wider community, when we believe ourselves immune from the issues that face the world, community breaks down. Without mutual caring, without mutual support, watch out! for we will all start to be in trouble.

God wanted the world to learn about the idea of community by calling God's own community into being. God's community was called Israel. About 4000 years ago, God called a man named Abram to follow God, giving up his comfortable life in what we now call Iraq and moving his family hundreds of miles away to a place we now call Israel. In Israel, Abram would have a family and this family would grow and continue to bond with each other.

It was this family, the family of Abraham, who became what we now call the Jewish people. God intended for the Jews to be united to each other through a code of behavior we call the Ten Commandments. What God wanted was that the community of Israel would model the best of human behavior to the world. God wanted Israel to be the ideal example of how we should get along with each other because God wanted us to live together in mutual care and mutual trust.

Another way of living in mutual care and mutual trust is called holiness and righteousness. To be holy is to live differently from the way the world lives. To be righteous is to live according to God's laws. The nation of Israel was to be the embodiment of holiness and righteousness to show everyone else that life did not have to be dog-eat-dog and grab the best for yourself. God's desire is that we should help each other and by so doing, we will help ourselves.

As we know, it didn't quite work out that way. As human beings, we live in fear, we live in mistrust, we live in the belief that when we help another person, we somehow diminish ourselves. There is, in the human equation, no such thing as win-win. We tend to view life as only win and lose.

So that, friends, is what makes Jesus different and our Christian way of thinking different. By all human standards, Jesus is the ultimate loser. He was born poor, to a tradesman with little more than

a set of carpentry tools. Jesus lived owning nothing and having no home. And then, for all his efforts, he was killed in the most gruesome way possible, crucifixion — being nailed to a cross to suffocate to death.

Why, then, are we so excited about the birth of Jesus, the ultimate loser? What is it about his life and his message that could possibly inspire us? Why would anyone want to follow his example when it is so contrary to the way most of us have been taught to live?

It is because his loss is our gain and at least a few people sense that. In Jesus we have God personally getting involved in our human affairs, dealing with the worst, and sometimes the best life has to offer, and spending his time preaching a message of acceptance, love, and peace.

To prove he was absolutely serious about his message, he accepted the verdict of the government and religious authorities that he should die. Jesus died, demonstrating that his message of peace and love and mutual support was so deep and so radical that even if the world hated him and hated his message, he was willing to die for the truth he proclaimed every single day.

How else could Jesus demonstrate how intensely he wanted the world to follow his teachings. He died for us. He died for love. He died for peace. He died for community, the community he fervently wants us to be right now.

That is who we, his church, are called to be. We are Jesus' community and we are called to behave in a way that shows that we take Jesus' teachings seriously. In other words, we are supposed to live in holiness and righteousness — sound familiar?

The proof is that in the case of the church, the Christian community Jesus died for, Jesus' death was followed by Jesus' resurrection demonstrating to all and for all that God endorsed Jesus life and ministry and God wants us to live as a community demonstrating Jesus' teachings to the world.

This, friends, is the “dawn from on high” that Zechariah is singing about in today's scripture. Jesus is all about a new and better way of life and living that stands in opposition to the ways of the world. We, the church, are intended to be communities of faith, love, and peace that exist to actively model what human life should be about and we are even called to be like Jesus and dare to oppose and speak against human behaviors that go against what God wants us to do.

And this is what we try to do as a church. Not just Collingswood Presbyterian Church, of course, but all churches of all denominations. I think, I hope, that we churches all agree that despite denominational variations, we do stand for something different from what the world stands for. We

may debate and disagree on how much the church differs from the world, but if a church or congregation exists that simply endorses what is happening in our world right now, that group has truly lost touch with Jesus and his message. Such a group is truly not a church at all.

There is no question that our efforts as a church and a congregation fall short of Jesus' life and teachings. We are not Jesus and there is no way that a group of sinners such as ourselves can match the perfection revealed in Jesus.

But there is no reason why we can't dedicate ourselves to trying our best to follow his example and telling the world what we are doing.

And that may well be the problem with the world today. Fewer and fewer people want to be part of the community called the church. Churches in our country are closing every week and for those not closing, they are seeing a dramatic drop in attendance and participation. Community as embodied by the church of Jesus Christ is fading away and this is a major problem for our nation and world.

As the church, our purpose is to model Jesus Christ, the one true example of what living human life is about. Jesus' speech, Jesus' actions, Jesus' faith should be obvious in what we individually say, do, and believe. Everything we do as a congregation should proclaim what Jesus said, what Jesus did, and what Jesus believed.

However, friends, if there are fewer and fewer churches in the world, that means there are fewer and fewer communities, Christian communities, that can model Jesus to the world. If there are few Christian communities to model Jesus to the world, that means fewer people can see the teachings of Jesus in action for themselves. Therefore, if fewer people can see the church in action because there are fewer churches, then fewer people will understand what God's community is about and lack teachers and models to follow.

And without teachers and models of community out there, how can we hope for the wider, non-church community to survive?

The answer is that we can't expect the world to survive without the example of the church. The increasing unrest and instability we see in our nation is a reflection of the diminished role the church has in our country. As believers, we anchor our ideas and actions to the existence of a God who created us, loves us, and sent the Son to die for us. But without a community teaching and constantly reminding people about that truth, then there can be no functional, mutually beneficial human community. We, instead, will continue to devolve into the idea of everyone for themselves. We will

continue to lose trust in each other. We will continue to regard each other with more and more suspicion, fear, and even hatred.

That is why friends, that all year long, but especially at Christmastime, we need to get bold and non-fearful and be willing to share our faith with the world using not only our words, but especially our actions. We need to realize that we can, we truly can make a difference in the lives of those who have nothing. We need to remind each other that God intends for all of us to be in community with one another, as imperfect as human communities are. We must bond and re-bond as community to help and support each other or we most assuredly will end up destroying each other as a result of our suspicion and hatred.

Today we gather again around this table of Christ, this table of peace. It is in Jesus that we re-discover our need for each other and remember that we are all created in the image of God. We share the bread and the cup with believers all over the world, forming a sacred community pledged to bringing the good news to the world that is insisting on destroying itself in countless hundreds of ways.

You are invited to come forward in a few moments and reaffirm your own commitment to maintaining and indeed growing this particular community of faith. You are invited to welcome the presence of God into your lives and let God use you, yes you, to be a messenger of God's word in the world.

If we do so, we will succeed in building community and bringing people into and back into this community of faith. The great and wonderful thing about building a congregation is that we become filled with hundreds of people filled with ideas on how to change the world, proclaim Jesus, and create peace. That is what we, yes us, can do. Be a community, build the community, let Jesus in to save the community.

Let the dawn from above pour all over us so that we can know and share Christ's peace and community.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.