

MESSENGER OF PEACE

Luke 1:68-79

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I invite you this morning to try to experience a state of peace within yourself. For a few moments, I want to focus not so much on talking about peace but about reminding ourselves what peace FEELS like. Where have you been where you experience a sense of serenity? Are there places in nature where you can go and you find you almost instantly feel calmer?

Do you know how it feels to walk through woods and feel as if the trees are healing you by their very presence? When we're near the ocean, we're soothed by the sound of waves, the smell of sea air. I have a friend who has a vacation cottage near Marblehead. She says that every time she drives over the Sandusky Bay bridge, she feels her whole body relaxing. Next month, 60 of us will be spending the night at the Jesuit Retreat House in Parma. They have 60 acres right off State Road. Our women's retreat is held there every year, and this is my experience every single January. I think to myself, "I don't have time to go this year; I'm too busy." Then I pack up and start driving. I drive down State Road that is full of American commerce: mattress stores, convenient stores, little bars. Then I pull into the long driveway that leads towards the retreat house and realize, "Oh, yes, this is why I come."

As a matter of fact, retreats are becoming more popular throughout the United States. Convents and monasteries that used to be full of nuns and monks are now populated by part-time monastics, men and women who come for short stays, weekends or weeks. According to Roman Catholic statistics, almost no one wants to be in a

full-time religious order any more, but people are flocking to retreat houses where they can experience, for a few days at a time, the peace that those places provide.

We are recognizing that the fast pace of our lives is too much for us. We all need a time-out every now and then. It was interesting to me that over 30 people signed up for a meditation class this fall as part of our CrossTraining series. There is a hunger within many of us to find some inner peace.

This year, in this congregation, we have been focusing on the word, “compassion” from time to time throughout the year. Our worship series during Lent was entitled, “40 Days of Compassion.” For 2019, our word for the year will be Sabbath. You may know that the fourth commandment is a command to keep the Sabbath, to set aside certain time and space in our lives for God, for our spiritual growth. The word, “sabbath,” in Hebrew means “to stop.” Traditionally, people have honored the Sabbath by taking one day out of the week for worship. Our Jewish brothers and sisters honor the Sabbath by beginning Friday night with prayer and candle-lighting and family dinner. Orthodox Jews actually refrain from all work for 24 hours.

Many contemporary people find it impossible to keep the Sabbath in any kind of rigid way, but they try to find other means. Some people try a technology Sabbath - turning off part or all of their technology for a period of time.

Wendell Berry is a farmer and a writer. He has lived and farmed a piece of land in Kentucky, near his birthplace, for over 40 years. He has also published over 40 books, mostly essays and poems. He writes about his belief that living in harmony with nature is essential for the human spirit.

I want to read for you his poem, “The Peace of Wild Things.”

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

I want to encourage you to give yourself permission to find peace within yourself. We don't always take care of our own spiritual health. I hear people say, "It seems selfish to think about time for me when there are so many needs in the world." It can feel self-indulgent to say to those in our own family, "I need more time to myself," especially when you are responsible for caring for children, or grandchildren, or parents, or grandparents. The truth is we are not able to care well for others if we aren't caring for ourselves.

We can't help bring peace to our families, our communities or our world if we are not at peace within our own souls.

In each of our lives, there are small ways we can carve out time to pay attention to our spirits, to listen to what God is speaking to us. Maybe it's getting up fifteen minutes early, maybe it's taking a half-day off once a month. I hope that worship is part of that spiritual self-care plan, too. It is surely our intent to plan worship that is nourishing for each person here.

Zechariah was a priest in the Jewish temple, married to a woman named Elizabeth. They had not been able to conceive a child, and now they were too old. This is a story that is repeated in the Bible. We especially remember the story of Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament. In those days, when a woman was unable to have a child, it was believed that something was wrong with her. The word "barren" is used to describe a woman who thought that her inability to conceive was some sort of punishment from God. One day old Zechariah is in the temple when the angel Gabriel visits him. "Zechariah, your prayers have been answered. Your wife is going to have a son, and you will name him John. God has plans for this child, who will fill you with joy and gladness." Zechariah doesn't laugh out loud at this news, the way Sarah did. But he does say to Gabriel, "Umm, you know Elizabeth and I are really old, right?" Gabriel says to him, "Because you are skeptical, you will not be able to speak until the day that you see that my prophecy has come true."

Fast forward nine months. Gabriel was right. Elizabeth gives birth to a son. They appear in the temple for the religious ceremony of circumcision and naming. The priests assume that the child will be named Zechariah after his father, but Zechariah writes on a tablet, "His name is John." At that moment he regains his ability to speak, and that child grows up to be the one we call John the Baptist. Zechariah gives a

speech that day in the temple, the beautiful poem Jackson read for us. It is both a song of praise to God, thanksgiving for a promise made real, and the job description for John - which ends in these words. The father says, "This is what my son will do: he will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and he will guide our feet in the way of peace."

We can find that peace as we grow closer to the one whom John baptized, and as we pattern our lives around Jesus, watching the way he lived, the way he balanced his life between time with people and time with God.

When we discover that peace within us, then we can begin to share it with the world. People who experience and believe in peace can change the world.

Do you know the story of the Christmas Truce of 1914? Five months after World War I began, it had already been brutal and bloody. In southern Belgium, there was a trench on the British-held side and a trench on the German-held side. In the middle was an area known as No Man's Land. At about 8:30 at night on Christmas Eve, a melody drifted from the German side. First, "O, Holy Night", and then, even more remarkably, "God Save the King." Peeking over the trenches, British soldiers were surprised to see Christmas trees lit with candles. Then a shout, "You no shoot, we no shoot." The Christmas Truce was a brief, spontaneous cease-fire that spread up and down the Western Front in the first year of World War I.

Several factors combined to produce the conditions for this Christmas Truce. By December of 1914, the men in the trenches were veterans, familiar enough with the realities of combat to have lost much of the idealism that they had carried into war in August, and most longed for an end to bloodshed. The war, they had believed, would be

over by Christmas, yet there they were in Christmas week still muddied, cold and in battle. Then, on Christmas Eve itself, several weeks of mild but miserably soaking weather gave way to a sudden, hard frost, creating a dusting of ice and snow along the front that made the men on both sides feel that something spiritual was taking place.

It was unofficial and illicit, and many officers disapproved, but for a few brief hours men from both sides laid down their arms, emerged from their trenches, and shared food, carols, games and comradeship.

Of course it didn't last, but it did happen. Peace is possible.