

## GUIDE US ON THE PATH OF PEACE

Luke 1: 68-79

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The words Beau just read are spoken by a man named Zechariah - he is the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah and Elizabeth are an old couple. They are a childless old couple, like others in the Bible. One day Zechariah is working in the temple and the angel Gabriel appears to him with a message - "Zechariah, your wife is going to have a baby and you will name him John. He will be one of God's servants; he will help prepare people for the Messiah."

Zechariah goes home, and indeed it's true - his wife is pregnant. But Zechariah is unable to speak for nine months. In the meantime, Luke tells us, Elizabeth's young cousin Mary comes to visit. The angel Gabriel has also visited her, and she is also pregnant. The two women, one very old and one a young virgin, share their unexpected pregnancies together.

Elizabeth gives birth to a boy, they name him John, and suddenly Zechariah can speak again. He hasn't spoken for nine months, but now he opens his mouth and speaks this ten-verse poem or song. It's often called the "Benedictus" - the Latin word for "Blessed" - he begins with the words, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel." We're more familiar with the song Mary sings while she's visiting Elizabeth - the song we call the Magnificat. The two songs are similar.

Zechariah's words are prophetic - they describe the vocation of his infant son. Zechariah says, "You, my child, will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to people, and forgive their sins."

Luke is giving us the backstory of John the Baptist in this beautiful song-poem.

Zechariah is so happy at what God has done, but this isn't a personal song of praise because he has become a father. It isn't a gushy, sentimental speech about his baby. Zechariah sees the big picture - he sees what God is doing in the world through this child, and what God will do in the world when Mary's child is born, very soon.

After being mute for nine months, Zechariah is eloquent; his song ends with these words, "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."

Those words speak of what God wants for our lives and our world - God wants to bring us the hope exemplified in a beautiful sunrise. God wants to bring us light when we feel as if we're surrounded by shadows. God wants us to walk in the ways of peace.

Because of those words, we read this passage on the second Sunday of Advent, the day that we light the candle of peace.

I have to tell you that this sermon didn't come easily this week. All week, I had the word, "peace" in my head. "This week's sermon is about peace." I was listening for stories I could include in a sermon about peace. As I read various articles and portions of books, I was attentive to passages I could share with you about peace. They didn't come. I even started seeking them out and I had trouble finding illustrations that seemed relevant. Tuesday night I was driving to meet some friends for dinner. The first news story I heard on the radio was about the school shooting in Michigan. The second story I heard was about the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. I turned the radio off and drove in the silence for a few minutes, and I thought - "I don't have anything to say

about peace.” How many times have I stood in this pulpit after a mass shooting? How many times have we prayed for one another during this pandemic? What else is left to say that will lead us towards the peace God wants for us - lives of health and wholeness, a world of justice?

In my determined search for inspiration, I even looked up a couple of my own old sermons. I thought, “Surely there’s been some time in the past when I had something meaningful to say about peace.” I happened to pull up my sermon from the second Sunday of Advent in 2015 - 6 years ago. That week, there had been a mass shooting in this country. That week, too, it was hard to preach about peace.

Sometimes we use words so often that they lose their meaning. We need to give them a rest, or find a new angle of approach. The word, “peace” was not inspiring me last week.

So I went back to Zechariah’s song, and read it yet again, and this time a phrase leapt off the page at me. Zechariah describes God as having “tender mercy.” “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.”

It’s an unexpected word to find, in a description of the creator of the universe - “Tender.”

I will tell you for certain that if I had been given an assignment, to write down a dozen or so words describing God, that word wouldn’t have made my list. “Loving” - yes. That word would be at the top of my list. But “tender”? It seems soft, doesn’t it? Too soft for God? Too gentle for our harsh and serious world?

Tenderness isn't the only quality of God, and it isn't the only quality we are called to embody. We also need God's fierceness, God's persistence, God's work ethic, and even God's righteous anger.

But at this moment, perhaps our weary souls need some tenderness. Could it be that one thing that's missing in our wounded, hurting world is some tenderness?

This week is the one-year anniversary of my mother's death. I have been chatting with my brother and my children about what we miss about her. This week on the phone, my son said, "You know, I've been remembering one time when Grammy Barbara and I were sitting down talking. She asked me what I like to eat for breakfast. She wasn't asking because she was planning a menu or a trip to the grocery store. She was just thinking about me, trying to imagine what my day to day life in Chicago is like, and she wanted to know what I like to eat for breakfast." It was a tender question, a question that reveals how much my mom cared about her grandson, about the details of his life.

Who are the people in your life who have loved you that tenderly?

The book of Ephesians calls on Christians to be "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Tenderness is caring, and then caring some more. Extreme caring. Not the casual question, "How are you?" But a question that listens for an answer, a question that is asked sitting down, looking someone in the eye, no distractions. Tenderness has time and attention.

Imagine that God cares about you with tenderness. God is so interested in you that God wants to know what your daily life is like. God is interested in what you like for breakfast. That's tender love.

Imagine with me that you're invited to the home of a relative who just had a baby. When someone allows you to hold a new-born baby, you hold that child with exquisite tenderness and the utmost care. You know the child cannot support her own head, so you cradle that head gently. We are all capable of that kind of gentleness. Then imagine with me that you say goodbye, and you get in your car to drive home, and are you immediately angry at the slow driver ahead of you on Lake Road? Does your tenderness turn into road rage in a manner of seconds?

What would happen if we realized that we all feel as vulnerable right now as infants? We are a people on edge. It seems like everyone I talk to has a story of being yelled at by someone at work, screamed at in a parking lot, honked at on the road, or sent nasty emails by people who once were thought of as friends. Our nerves are frayed. What would happen if we tried to treat one another with the tenderness of God?

We are people who are anxious. We could cope with a pandemic that was a crisis, but now we need to pivot and learn to live with a pandemic that may be more chronic. We could adjust to a new normal, but how do we learn to live with constant change?

And we are people who are grieving. We've lost loved ones, we've lost experiences, we've lost family celebrations and rites of passage. And there's no closure and no healing because the losses just keep coming.

We need God's tender mercies, the peace that only God can bring - the inner peace that confronts and conquers our fear, and the belief that we still are called to the work of peacemaking, a vocation that will unite us in hope and joy.

Once I decided that I would preach about tenderness, that I would allow tenderness to be the prism through which we view peace, I remembered this poem, by Naomi Shihab Nye; it's entitled *Shoulders*:

A man crosses the street in rain,  
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,  
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.

No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo  
but he's not marked.

Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,

HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ears fill up with breathing.

He hears the hum of a boy's dream

deep inside him.

We're not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we're not willing to do what he's doing  
with one another.

The road will only be wide.  
The rain will never stop falling.

The poem, "Shoulders," by Naomi Shihab Nye.

We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to carry one another, see one another as fragile, treat one another - and this world - with utmost care.

Zechariah hadn't spoken for nine months, but when he finally did, it was to tell us of God's tender mercies, the essence and the beginning of peace. Thanks be to God.