

Message: “Peace Through Understanding”

“Remember, we’re only here for the things on our list,” Linda told the kids as they walked into the store. It was brightly decorated for Christmas, full of things to catch the attention of young children, but Linda and her husband were on a tight budget. She settled newborn Bradley’s car seat into the front of the shopping cart and started out.

Truth be told, Linda wouldn’t have been shopping at all if she hadn’t been desperate. Their fourth child arrived only two and a half weeks earlier, and things were crazy at home. If they were going to have any toilet paper, Linda had to get it now. Her husband was at work, but she thought she could make a quick trip with the kids.

“What was I thinking?” ran through Linda’s head. The kids were bickering from the moment they entered the store. She steered the cart into the paper products aisle, first on the list. She tossed in paper towels and tissues along with the toilet paper. Next stop, laundry detergent.

Despite her warnings, the older kids were still fussing. Linda reached for a bottle of floor cleaner and hesitated before putting it in the cart.

“You won’t have enough for diapers,” she thought. Linda put the cleaner back on the shelf.

“Can we go to the toy aisle?” asked Jeffrey.

“No,” Linda said. “Santa is coming soon enough.”

“We’ll just look,” said Jamie. “We promise.”

“Please, can’t we?” Christopher chimed in.

Bradley shifted in his seat. The last thing she needed was for him to get upset. A choir of pleas continued.

“Can I get ...?” No. “That’s not fair. How come ...?”

“No one is getting anything!” Linda said. As if on cue, Bradley started to fuss. Then cry. Then wail. She could feel every head in the store turn toward them. Linda leaned on her cart and told herself to just breathe.

“Lord, I need your support!” she prayed.

Linda headed for the diapers. The kids kept on bickering and fighting.

Bradley cried harder.

“That’s enough!” Linda said. Her Mom voice got the kids’ attention. “Everyone, settle down.” She picked Bradley up and rocked him gently.

That’s when she noticed a lady approaching. “Here it comes,” Linda thought. “She’s going to complain about my children. Maybe ask me to take the crying baby outside. Or demand I get my family under control.” She braced for the worst.

“I was a young Mom like you once,” the woman said. Her tone was warm and friendly, nothing judgmental. “It’s so hard when you have little ones.” She looked at the children, who, for the moment at least, had stopped fussing and fighting. “I really commend you for being brave enough to come to the store with them.”

“She really does understand,” Linda thought. The woman pulled something out of her purse. “At Christmastime I carry a small gift for someone God picks out. God has chosen you for a simple blessing.”

She put a white box in Linda’s hand, then turned and walked away. The kids circled around. Linda was too stunned even to say thank you before the woman left.

“What is it?” Jeffrey asked. His tone was hushed. The other kids didn’t say a word. Even Bradley’s cries quieted. Linda opened the box. Inside was a little ornament to hang on the tree. They all admired it. A blanket of peace seemed to have settled on them.

The children were model citizens in the checkout line and on the ride home. Their Dad was surprised she’d gone with their brood in tow. “It’s quite a story,” Linda said. They hung the ornament where everyone could see it. The ornament still has a special place on the tree. And every year, Linda’s grandchildren ask her to tell the story. They sit quietly listening, while the Christmas blessing touches a whole new generation.¹

The theme for this Sunday in Advent is peace. Paul penned the immortal words, *“Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:6-7, CEB).

¹ Material drawn from <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/this-mother-encountered-a-heaven-sent-angel-at-target/>

Peace which passes all understanding. What a wonderful blessing it is to know God's peace. We all want to experience it. We pass the peace of Christ each week. We say, "Peace be with you" when we greet each other. We sing about peace, pray for peace and hope for peace.

Yet we live in a world that certainly isn't peaceful. From armed conflicts between nations, to conflicts dividing the people within a nation, to road rage, to violence between groups, individuals and at home, we are people who yearn for peace yet struggle to find it.

In most aspects of our lives, we embrace the typical responses to conflict. We fight. Or we flee. This plays out in so many ways. For example, in movies we find either a high body count or unrealistic romantic expectations. Yes, I enjoy Hallmark movies, too.

It makes me wonder, "How do we find true, meaningful peace?" I think we're like the people of Israel in this way. Our scriptures for today are like bookends, showing us what life on our own is like, and then giving us hope in God's peace, which, yes, we seek to understand. Let's take a few minutes to reflect on them.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi is a prophet about the same time as Nehemiah, who rebuilt the temple. Some of the people divided by the wars have returned, but they're struggling to get along. Even worse, they're struggling with their faith. They're showing disrespect to God. The priests are teaching and doing the wrong things.

God isn't happy with them. Our traditional reading needed context. The preceding verse: "*You have made the Lord tired with your words. You say, 'How have we made God tired?' When you say: 'Anyone doing evil is good in the Lord's eyes,' or 'God delights in those doing evil,' or 'Where is the God of justice?'*" (Malachi 2:17). If we don't know God is peaceful and just, Maybe we've lost our way. We may be seeking peace our way, not God's way. Maybe we need to examine our relationship with God first to understand the nature of God's peace.

The prophet is speaking to the clergy and the people. God has had enough of false words, evil practices and unhealthy teaching. Even their festivals and offerings are like refuse to God. They're saying the words and doing the actions, but they don't mean it. People don't have faith. They don't trust God.

And so, God leaves them alone until the messenger comes. God's Spirit won't be in the temple during the long years of conflict which lie ahead. The land is conquered again and again. People are oppressed. Their faith is refined in the fire of conflict. They cry out to God.

Four hundred years later, Zechariah steps into the holy of holies to do his priestly duties and encounters a messenger. The angel tells him Elizabeth will have a son, who will be called John. And then, to teach him humility, Zechariah has no voice until the baby is born and named.

God is back in a new way! The covenant will be renewed. The messenger who will prepare the way is coming soon. Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks words of blessings, promise and peace over his son, John. God will save us from our enemies, show mercy, and rescue us so we can serve the Lord without fear or anxiety. We can live in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.

This is the path of peace. John the Baptist didn't lead an army. He didn't do miracles. What John did was remind people about God. He share the message. He spoke boldly about their need for repentance, and then baptized people, washing them clean. John prepares them for the Prince of Peace who comes, surprising us with hope in a world filled with chaos.

God's peace is a peace the world doesn't fully know. We catch glimpses at times, but humanity struggles to understand our finite limits and the nature of the infinite God. We want to do it on our own. Yet, it's our certainty in what we think we know, that causes so much discord and division in our lives and in our world.

Reconciliation comes when our spirit humbly seeks to learn and understand. Peace comes when our humble spirit removes misconceptions and pursues deeper understanding of God and people who come from different backgrounds and perspectives. This isn't easy.

Why is it so hard for us to see what is of God in one another?

Both sides in any conflict often have difficulty seeing the other at all, let alone seeing that which is of God in the other. Peacemakers hold a brave space where people feel encouraged to share their viewpoints, even when they are uncomfortable or challenging.

Jean Zaru said, “I believe we are called to the struggle of people everywhere who have no way to escape the unending fatigue of their labor and the daily denial of their human rights and human worth. We must be converted, so to speak, to a new vision of human dignity, what we call ‘that of God’ in each person, even in those we oppose. We must let our hearts be moved by the anguish and suffering of other people.

In our struggle to live peaceful lives, we may find ourselves at a crossroads when faced with conflict or violence. This is when we need our deepest convictions, when we really must believe in the power of non-violence and grace to transform conflict.

How can we have peace within us when we worry so much about life in general and the lives of our family members? How can we have peace within us when we feel restricted, when walls are built – literally or figuratively, to separate us from one another?

We’re constantly being told to be peaceful. But this inner peace isn’t simply being nice, or being passive, or permitting oneself to be trampled on without protest. It isn’t passive nonviolence, but the nonviolence of courageous action, speaking for what is right in God’s sight.

What inner force moves us, renews us and provides the steadiness we need? If we deserve credit for courage, it isn’t for anything we do, but for continuing in our daily struggle, for being steadfast and, all the while, remaining open to love and the beauty of the earth, and then contributing to healing when it’s violated.”²

Martin Luther said, “O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek ... to be understood as to understand.” The paradox of peace is we first need to know how to understand it to accept and affirm it. An attitude of understanding prepares the way for God’s refining work in our hearts and minds, enabling us to commune with God and other people.

Humility invites God’s light to guide us toward the path of peace. God works in our lives to help us continue to grow in understanding. So, let’s be open to truths coming from unexpected places. Let’s admit we don’t have all the answers, and we’ve caused division and discord because of our misinformation and limited viewpoints.

² <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/remaining-steadfast-in-nonviolence/>

God graciously came to be with, and understand, the limited and obstinate people of this earth.

Why? To make peace with creation, and to bring God and humanity into communion. The Word became flesh to save and understand, to smell, see, taste, feel, touch and hear. The Word became flesh to give us peace, and to show us the way to peace with justice. Thank you, Lord, for your grace and mercy.

Lord, we walk in your footsteps. Guide us in your way of peace.

Let us pray ...

Malachi 2:17-3:4 (CEB)

You have made the Lord tired with your words. You say,
“How have we made him tired?”

When you say:

“Anyone doing evil is good in the Lord’s eyes,”
or “God delights in those doing evil,”
or “Where is the God of justice?”

Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me;
suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple.
The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,
says the Lord of heavenly forces.

Who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can withstand his appearance?

He is like the refiner’s fire or the cleaner’s soap.

He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver.

He will purify the Levites
and refine them like gold and silver.

They will belong to the Lord,
presenting a righteous offering.

The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord
as in ancient days and in former years.

Luke 1:68-79 (CEB)

“Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house,
just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

He has brought salvation from our enemies

and from the power of all those who hate us.

He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and remembered his holy covenant,

the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted that we would be rescued

from the power of our enemies

so that we could serve him without fear,

in holiness and righteousness in God’s eyes,

for as long as we live.

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

You will tell his people how to be saved

through the forgiveness of their sins.

Because of our God’s deep compassion,

the dawn from heaven will break upon us,

to give light to those who are sitting in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide us on the path of peace.”