

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Don't be Afraid to Bring Peace
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Zechariah 8:9-17; Luke 1:46-55

I had never paid much attention to them. They were just old books sitting on my grandmother's bookshelves. But then one day, being a bit bored and curious, I pulled one out. Then I became fascinated. They were a set of Encyclopedia Britannica from the early 1930s. The article that interested me the most, being a boy, was the one on The Great War. At first I was confused by the title, yet as I read it became apparent that I was reading about the First World War. Somewhere in the article the war was also referred to as the war to end all wars. It was referred to in that way because the authors and society at large evidently hoped that the utter brutality and senselessness of the war with its killing fields, use of mustard gas and overall slaughter of a generation of young men would convince people that peace was preferable to war. Yet, as a young history buff I knew how wrong they were. The rest of the 20th century became one of the deadliest in history...though as I have grown older, I have discovered that there were other conflicts and periods that were worse. So why is it that we did not learn from that war to end all wars? Why is it that even today there is violence around the world and in our nation? Why is it that peace, real peace, seems almost impossible to bring about? The answer I would argue is that we did not listen to Mary, because Mary had the three-step plan for peace that she believed her son would implement and bring peace to the whole of creation.

We begin with step one, which is humility. In verse 51 we hear Mary say, "*(God) has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*" There can be no peace without humility. As long as people believe that they are superior to other people, peace cannot be achieved. It cannot be achieved because the belief in superiority leads to oppression, derision and domination of others. The belief in superiority, not arguments about religion, is what led to most of the violence and wars in this world. My clan is superior to yours so we can kill you. My race is superior to your so we can enslave you. My religion is superior to yours so we can oppress you. Humility changes those equations. Humility allows for people to share in life and living. Without humility, there can be no peace.

Step two in Mary's plan for peace is justice. In verse 52 we read, "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*" There can be no peace without justice. What I mean by justice is that there is shared power in which all persons are treated fairly and justly. We can hear this in Zechariah when the prophet proclaims, "*These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace.*" Rendering in the gates true judgments means applying the law equally to rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The problem with power is that those who possess it are tempted to use it to pervert justice and dominate the weak and marginalized. They use their power to rob,

steal, cheat and oppress. When this happens there can be no peace because oppression causes anger and resentment from those who are the victims of injustice. So, when justice reigns, all persons know that they are worthy of being treated as fully human, with equal value and worth, and making peace is possible.

Step three in Mary's plan for peace is equity. In verse 53 we read, "*He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*" There can be no peace without equity. What I mean by equity is that all persons have enough; enough food, adequate housing, decent medical care and meaningful work. This is not equality in which all persons have exactly the same of everything. It is instead a willingness for society to equitably distribute its resources; to organize itself in such a way as to insure sufficiency for all. This means insuring that all persons have enough to eat, clean water to drink, adequate housing and in our society, health care. This is the Biblical understanding of equity...no one has too much, and no one has too little. The issue with inequity is that once again it causes anger, resentment and diminishes the lives of those who are left out of the distribution of the goods in society. So there can be no peace without equity, but establishing equity creates societies, nations and a world in which peace is possible.

Many of you may say, "John this seems to be political theory." I would argue that it is not political but Biblical. It is Biblical, first because it is the essence of the Law and the Prophets. All one has to do is to read the Torah and the prophets and one will see that humility, justice and equity are the life blood of those writings. We can also see that this is Biblical because it is the essence of the life of Mary's son Jesus, who came to bring peace to the world.

Jesus lived with humility, first becoming fully human and then eating and drinking with sinners, tax collectors, women and children. Jesus urged justice. He made it clear to his disciples that they were not to "*Lord it over*" one another, but instead they were to be servants of one another. Jesus lived with equity by feeding the hungry and commanding his followers to do likewise, along with clothing the naked, caring for the homeless and giving water to the thirsty. Jesus was the living example of Mary's plan for peace.

I understand that this plan might make many of us uncomfortable, perhaps even afraid because it cuts across the grain of much of our national narrative of radical individualism; pull yourself up by your own bootstraps; what I earned is mine. But we are called to not be afraid to bring peace; to work for those things that make for peace. We are called to not be afraid to listen to Mary and emulate Jesus.

So, as we come to the table this morning and we partake of the bread and cup, my challenge for each of us, is to ask ourselves, how I am helping to bring peace to this world, by living humbly, and working for justice and equity, a world for which Mary sang and Jesus lived?