

## ***Testifying to Peace***

Luke 3:1-6

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Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.*

My sermon today is entitled, "Testifying to Peace," and it is based on Luke 3:1-6, which Ray just read. It is the Gospel lectionary passage for the second Sunday in Advent. Last Sunday we focused on hope, this Sunday we focus on peace, next week joy, and the following week love.

For Luke, it is very important that the Jesus-event is located among the political events of the day. Let me give you a brief history lesson about the folks who are mentioned in the scripture lesson for today. First there was the Emperor Tiberius, who ruled Rome from 14-37 of the common era. He followed Augustus, who was emperor when Jesus was born. Tiberius, though, was emperor when Jesus was an adult.

Pontius Pilate was governor, or prefect, of Judea and Samaria when Jesus was active. He was appointed by Tiberius. We talked about him a few weeks ago, when our scripture lesson was from John's story of Jesus' trial before Pilate.

The Herod that is mentioned here is not Herod the Great, but his son Herod Antipas. Herod the Great was appointed by Augustus as king over all Israel, but when he died, his kingdom was broken up so that Galilee was under the tetrarchy (or rule) of his son Herod Antipas.

Another son, Philip, was given territory northeast of Galilee, namely the regions of Ituraea and Trachonitis.

Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene, and it's pronounced A-bi-le-ne, not Abilene as in Abilene, TX. Abilene was also northeast of Galilee. You can forget about Lysanias. Although he has a cool name, neither he nor Abilene are mentioned again in the New Testament.

Two high priests are then named. Annas, who ruled 6-15 CE, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, who ruled 18-36 CE. He was the high priest when Jesus was tried.

Pilate ruled Judea, Caiaphas and Annas were in Jerusalem, Herod ruled Galilee, and Philip and Lysanias ruled areas to the northwest.

These folks—Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, and the rest—were all guardians of the Pax Romana, the Roman peace that lasted two centuries. It began with the accession of Augustus, and the empire was free of civil war.

But please understand that Rome was not at peace with those it conquered. Jews revolted twice during this period, and their temple was destroyed during the first revolt. A Roman historian said, "Robbery, slaughter and plunder they falsely name empire; they make a desert, and they call it peace."<sup>1</sup> John Dominic Crossan, who will speak to us this afternoon, says in his *God & Empire* that Rome's approach was peace through victory.<sup>2</sup>

Into the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, the Word of God comes--to John. This wording, "The word of God came to such-and such" appears frequently in the Old Testament prophets: The word of God came to Jeremiah. The word of God came to Isaiah. The word of God came to Amos. And so forth. The word of God always came to prophets to proclaim justice for the poor. And so, amid the Pax Romana, peace through victory, another way is proposed.

The word of God comes to John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. In the previous chapter, Luke has already said that they were old folks, who had a baby. In other words, Elizabeth had to go from geriatrics to obstetrics to give birth to John.

And this old codger and new father, Zechariah had sung a song at John's birth, in which he said that his son will be "called the prophet of the Most High" who will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (1: 76). He will "guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:79). Amy-Jill Levine, who will also speak to us this afternoon, says in her book *The Misunderstood Jew* that the story of the birth of John the Baptist to aged Elizabeth and Zechariah "recapitulates the numerous special births of the figures of Israel's past," such as Isaac, Benjamin, Samuel, and Samson.<sup>3</sup>

So, the word of God comes to John in the wilderness, and he proclaims "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:2-3). Repent! Change your mind-set! Baptism was not a normal thing for first-century Jews. It was for Gentiles who converted to Judaism. The baptism was to wash their Gentile stain. But John was treating Jews like Gentiles. They had to repent and be baptized so that their sins would be forgiven.

Luke links up John's ministry with something that the prophet Isaiah said about the release of the Hebrew exiles from captivity in Babylon. The Babylonians had destroyed the Jerusalem temple and had taken the upper crust of Jewish society into captivity in Babylon. But after 60 years, there was a regime change, and the Babylonian king said that Jews could return to their homeland. Isaiah writes, "Prepare the way of the Lord," that is, the way from captivity in Babylon to freedom in Palestine. "Prepare the way of the Lord." That's what our banners say, "Prepare the way." Prepare the way to a renewed humanity, as we talked about last week. Prepare the way to peace. Prepare the way to joy. Prepare the way to love.

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30.4, in Neville Morley, *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 38, accessed at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pb5x.7?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pb5x.7?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 197.

John's preaching, however, did not always sound peaceful or joyful or loving. He had not been to seminary, and he had not taken preaching classes. He called his hearers, "Brood of vipers!" (Luke 3:7). John did not take an offering.

He told his audience to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," that is, act like you've had a change of mind-set.

The crowd asked, "What should we do?"

John said to share food and clothing. "If you've got two coats, share with those who don't have any. Same way with your food" (3:11).

The tax collectors asked what they should do, and John said not to collect any more than they should.

The soldiers also asked, and John told them to be satisfied with their wages and not to extort money.

John teaches the crowd how to prepare the way of the Lord, through sharing possessions and through being satisfied with what you have. Jesus will amplify these teachings in his career: "Give to everyone who begs from you. ...But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. ...Give, and it will be given to you" (6:30, 35, 38).

Over against the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, which achieves peace through victory, is the Pax Christi, the peace of Christ, which achieves peace through justice. Pax Romana: peace through victory, peace through domination, peace through the closed fist. Pax Christi: peace through justice, peace through sharing, peace through the open hand.

These are two ways to approach life: with the open hand and with the closed fist. The closed fist is also the grasping hand that looks for something bigger and better. But such a spirit becomes the spirit of anxiety and fear and rage. But no, John the Baptist and Jesus tell us to prepare the way with generosity and contentment, the open hand that reaches out to give and to receive.

I asked the Bible study participants last Tuesday what connotations peace has for them. They spoke about peace with God, peace among one's neighbors, and world peace. All these aspects of peace are intertwined, aren't they? The group also spoke about peacekeepers, peacemakers, and peacebuilders. They talked about how one learns conflict resolution in the family first. Every parent learns to say often to a child, "Please share." But it is a lesson that one learns throughout life, not just in childhood.

Peace is a path to pursue. Just because one is a Christian, it does not mean that one is necessarily a peacemaker or a peacebuilder. We have some Christians doing violence. This is not the peace of Christ, Pax Christi, but rather the peace of the world. Whenever one takes up arms in the name

of Christ, one is fooling oneself and not living under the peace of Christ. Peace, the peace of Christ, is found in generosity and contentment.

I will conclude with the well-known prayer of Francis of Assisi, which can be found in the hymnal number 468. Please read it aloud with me as we commit ourselves to peace:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

And all God's people said, "Amen."

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