

## Moore Presbyterian Churches

December 5, 2021

*Second Sunday of Advent*

### **God calls us to worship**

**Hymn:** #118 “Hark the glad sound”

Advent reading and candle lighting (Insert)

**Song:** “A Candle is Burning” (verse 2)

### **We offer our prayers**

Prayer of Praise

God of peace and promise,  
you are the giver of life, living in us through the power of your Holy Spirit.  
You are the voice that calls us from our wandering,  
setting us on a new path.  
You are the living water that purifies us,  
baptising us for service in the world that so badly needs your love.  
Refresh us in this time of worship,  
and reignite our desire to serve you each and every day.  
Glory, honour and praise be yours now and always,  
Holy One, Holy Three,  
One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;  
our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Prayer of Confession (Unison):

**God of mercy:  
you have called us to be thankful  
for your good gifts to us,  
but too often we have taken them for granted  
as if we deserved them.**

**You have called us to be hopeful  
through the gospel of Jesus Christ,  
but too often despair has come upon us,  
and the cares of the world have weighed us down.**

**You have called us to be joyful  
in the wonder of your presence among us,  
but too often we become mired in the mundane  
and lose the gift of reverence.**

**By your saving power, O God,  
enable us to celebrate your love for us  
with joy and thanksgiving.**

### ***Assurance of Pardon***

Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, proclaimed: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, giving light to those in darkness, guiding our feet in the way of peace.” Receive God’s tender mercy today. Trust that God’s peace will prevail for all those who seek to rest in the forgiveness Jesus offers through his life, death and resurrection.

Accept God’s offer of pardon, and be at peace with God, at peace with one another, and at peace with yourself.

And give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His love endures forever.

*Ministry of Music* (St. Andrew’s): “Let there be peace on earth”

### ***We offer our lives and resources***

*Offering plates are positioned as you enter and leave the sanctuary. If you’d prefer to use e-transfers, please speak with Rev. Ian, Judy Armstrong (St. Andrew’s), or Howard McKellar)*

***Hymn:*** #129 “Prepare the way, O Zion”

## ***God speaks to us through his Word***

### Peace

I'm sure most of us are somewhat familiar with John the Baptist. He's the guy standing in the Jordan River dressed like Elijah of Old and calling everyone who would listen to "Repent."

That word has become encumbered with a lot of negative baggage. It's the word you might see on a sign on the side of the highway. The effect of which is often eye-rolling rather than witnessing the grace of God! As we'll read next week, John's method of preaching was a far-cry from what might be accepted in most churches today. To hear his words, is to be somewhat fearful of the implications of one's present living!

However, John's message was not intended to be one of fire and brimstone, but one of grace. And "repentance" is not an ugly word. It's a word of extra chances.

In order to grasp the intended message and effect of John's preaching, we need to be familiar with his father Zechariah's song at his birth, and also the prophetic tradition which John embodied.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, designated as the Sunday of Peace. The readings for today give us some context for John's ministry and help us the urgency of his preaching.

READ:       MALACHI 2:17-3:4  
              LUKE 1:68-80  
              LUKE 3:1-6  
              PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

In the year 605 BCE, the Babylonian armies invaded Judah and took some Jews into exile.

In 586 BCE, they destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem and took most of the rest of the Jews into exile.

In 539 BCE, the Persians overthrew the Babylonian empire and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their land.

Which they did, generally speaking, with eagerness.

They were eager to get back to normal; to return to life and worship as it was before the exile.

Sound familiar?

How many times have you heard or felt the need to “get back” to life as it was before COVID? When there were no masks, no physical distancing; when you could visit without first conducting a risk-assessment; and a cough was simply a cough, not a potential harbinger of a deadly virus!

Even though some things have returned in a sense – we have resumed in-sanctuary worship, we are hoping to worship on Christmas Eve, people have returned to work, we can visit within reason – there is still a hole in the experience. Often it feels like a lop-sided peg in a hole. Almost there, but not quite! A feeling that does not suggest peace!

What the Israelites experienced after the exile hardly met their expectations. The city was in ruins and the temple destroyed.

Through the leadership of men like Ezra and Nehemiah, they mustered enough energy to rebuild the city walls and the temple, after a fashion. But it was never quite right.

The return to the Promised Land wasn't the glorious rebuilding of Eden they had expected. They were tired, hungry, and impoverished. Where was this glorious presence of God among His people as they had been promised!?

The people of Israel had become discouraged and disillusioned. The ways of Yahweh hardly seemed relevant anymore. Fifty years or so after rebuilding the temple and returning to Jerusalem, Malachi was called to encourage the people to not be complacent. He was called to encourage them to maintain their faithfulness to Yahweh and the covenant. To keep their worship holy to the Lord, to be honest in their tithes, to remember that their lives are to be testimonies of God – and not to embrace the ways of the nations who serve other gods. Malachi was called to encourage them to not call good what God has called evil, even if their neighbours call it good!

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*Malachi was called to remind the people that the way of Peace still rests in the covenant with the One who is the God of all gods.*

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In the Christian Bible, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. (The Jewish Bible is organized differently.) This placement was deliberate. Malachi is the last word of the Old Testament. Tradition holds that, after his message (~460 BCE), 400 years lapsed before the advent of the Christ. And they were not good years. The Jewish communities soon became subject to the expanding Greek empire and a period of horrendous persecution ensued coupled with Jewish revolt.

Through those 400 years, Malachi's words were spoken, read, and prayed. And people must have wondered if there was any truth to them:

*I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.*

When, Lord? Where is the God of justice?

Until, one day, a baby boy was born whose parents were Elizabeth, relative to the mother of Jesus, and a temple priest named Zechariah. A boy named John.

We don't know much about John's early life, other than, from the time when he was old enough to leave his parents, he lived in the wilderness and God prepared him for his ministry. In the wilderness, he "grew and became strong in spirit." Sometime around the year 30 C.E. – 490 years after Malachi preached, he showed up on the bank of the Jordan River and began "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Like "repentance", "sin" has acquired a lot of complicated theological baggage.

Simply put, sin is that which separates us from the One who created us and in fellowship with whom is life eternal. We cannot know peace in our hearts and minds – and thus in our families, neighbourhoods, and the world – as long as we are separated from God. It doesn't matter which king is on the throne, as long as sin rules we are apart from our Creator and thus there is no peace.

With the advent of the Christ, however, a new age has begun: a kingdom whose defining characteristic is the forgiveness of sin; the reconciliation of God with people.

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

And yet, that peace that passes understanding all too frequently eludes us!

I once heard a sermon in which the preacher observed that human beings tend to be pretty uncomfortable with grace and yet very comfortable with sin! We understand sin. But grace is so foreign it can be frightening! Grace isn't something we can control. Grace is the gift God gives because God loves His creation and won't rest until His peace is returned to His land.

There are many mountains and valleys that stand in the Lord's way to our souls. Some are of our own doing: the frivolous distractions and drunkenness about which we read last week. Some are the worries of this age: illness, natural disasters, money, wars, food, .... Some are deeply embedded desires to not need a god; to be able to secure peace in our souls (and hence in the world) in our own way.

Despite this, the Messiah has come.

There isn't going to be another one.

With Jesus, there is forgiveness of sin.

When we turn to Him, trusting that He is working for the replanting of Eden – for salvation – in the power of the Holy Spirit who speaks through the scriptures and convicts our hearts and minds, he will refine and purify us. He will remove those bits of habit that prevent us from shining as the divine image bearers the Lord created us to be. He will flatten the mountains, fill in the valleys, and straighten the crooked places until there is a straight path for the Lord to come to us and convince us that the dawn *has* broken; the state of forgiveness is here; and in Christ there is peace of mind, heart, and body.

As Paul said to the Philippians: “The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:78-79

To prepare ourselves to accept the knowledge of the forgiveness of sin by which we can know the peace that passes understanding and thus can those with whom we interact, requires that we trust Christ's grace to be real and sufficient, and that we allow the Spirit to do his work of refining our hearts and minds. Of changing us. Dare I say it, of converting us.

Hence, John's call for repentance.

Repentance isn't supposed to be an ugly word. It's supposed to be a word of life. A word of extra chances. A word of becoming who our Creator intends us to be in fellowship with himself.

Repentance is a daily turning to the Lord with heart, mind, and body.

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*Repentance is a word of Peace.*

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For the health of our souls, the good of the nations, and the glory of God.

Amen.

## ***We respond with prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession***

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guest.  
Enter our lives today with your blessing.  
We are lonely for you and the peace you bring.  
Draw near to us in friendship and faithfulness,  
so that in this season of celebration, we may know you are near,  
and be filled with gratitude, even in the face of challenge and uncertainty.  
Christ Jesus, coming among us,  
**Bring us peace.**

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guide.  
Show us the way to wisdom and gratitude  
in the face conspiracy theories and distrust.  
We thank you for the kindness we know  
in friends and good neighbours, in warm houses and warm smiles.  
We pray for those who have lost their way in life  
and feel like there is no place to turn.  
Equip us to reach out to those who need your embrace and ours.  
Christ Jesus, coming among us,  
**Bring us peace.**

Come, Christ Jesus, be our hope.  
Touch us with your healing and grace in every way we need these gifts.  
We remember before you those we know and those known to you alone  
who are living with loss or illness this season,  
those who face depression or discouragement,  
all who are worried about the impact of the pandemic,  
and any who will find it hard to be merry this year.  
*(Keep silence for 30 seconds)*

Shine the light of your comfort into their lives and ours.  
Christ Jesus, coming among us,  
**Bring us peace.**

Come, Christ Jesus, and rule in our lives.  
Claim your rightful place in our hearts.  
This world is struggling for the justice and mercy you bring.  
We remember before you places marked by violence and upheaval,  
and the devastating impacts of the climate crisis.  
*(Keep a brief silence)*

Draw near to all leaders and citizens working for peace and justice.  
Encourage honourable action and co-operation  
in confronting global challenges and local needs.  
Give hope to people under oppression  
and those who live with fear or hunger day by day.  
Hasten the day when the world's peoples will live as neighbours,



reconciled in your truth and freedom.  
Christ Jesus, coming among us,  
**Bring us peace.**

Receive our prayers, spoken and unspoken, as we sum up our hope in the words  
you taught us:

**The Lord's Prayer**

**God sends us with His blessing**

**Hymn:** #126 "On Jordan's bank"

**Blessing**