***“All Flesh***: ***the Theme of Peace”*** by S. Finlan, at First Church, December 9, 2018

**Malachi 3:1–4**

1See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; 3he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Luke 3:1–6**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Both of these passages talk about preparing the way, and we understand John the Baptist to be the one who prepared the way for Jesus the Messiah.

The overall Advent theme is preparing *ourselves* for the birth of the Messiah. In fact, we each have to become a John the Baptist over our *own* lives, preparing ourselves to let Christ be formed *in us*. Morally and spiritually, we are preparing a way for Jesus to come into our hearts. If we prepare our *homes* for Christmas, shouldn’t we prepare our hearts?

We preached on hope last week. This week the theme is peace. We seek peace in our world, and *even* in our nation! But evenmore basic is making peace with God. If you have an argument with God—and who *doesn’t*?—you need to come to terms with it, bring it to a place of peace. Try to understand that God has *forever*, and is never in a hurry, the way *we* often are. Try to accept that God knows how much we suffer, and is willing to share the experience *with* us. You can honestly thrash it out with God, argue it out, or even *cry* it out, as you seek to make peace with God. You may not be able to settle it completely, but you can resolve to *pursue* resolution, to *seek* peace. God always cares what you are *seeking*, more than where you are *at*.

You can say “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). That was said by a man who was trying to cooperate with Jesus’ instruction to have faith. It was an honest response that showed both sides of the man’s attitude: his willingness to believe, and his persistent doubt. The more important half is the willingness to believe. God can work with that. God is waiting, reaching out to you. God yearns for conversation with you. Nothing is off the table.

When you practice that much faith, you will start to feel joy. Joy is the next Advent theme because it is the next experience once you have made peace with God. And love comes after that. At least, this is how I understand it now. I might see it differently if I experience new growth. Then I’ll have to come and give a replacement sermon! But this is where my reflection stands now.

Right now I’m seeing that peace grows out of faithful hope, and it issues in joy. Do you ever feel this joy in church, especially towards the end, when the hope has sunk in, and the peace has settled around? Now, it also could be that you’re meeting with your friends, and *that* lifts you up. But I think some of this natural progression from hope to peace to joy is happening.

In this sermon, I need to say more things about peace, about how *social* peace has been secured. There are several different levels that functioned. There is the family unit, which is the fundamental peace group in a dangerous world. How strong we are when we have our family to support us. Then there is the clan or tribe; blood is thicker than water, but it may leave us at odds with all *other* clans or tribes. Next comes the *covenant*, the agreement between tribes that enables them to share resources instead of fighting over them. When rights are extended to each side, neither side feels it has to go to war.

Peace between nations requires even more diplomatic skill, sensitivity, and attention to many more details. Senator George Mitchell had these when he arbitrated and brought

about the Irish Peace Accord.

What about peace between religions? Besides diplomatic skills, it requires a conscious decision to renounce claims of final authority and superiority. The leaders have to be profoundly humble and they have to know that no religion has a copyright on God,
 no priesthood has a magic formula,
 no church has a binding contract on God,
 and no group has any claim to perfection.

Religious peace will require genuine humility *repeatedly* practiced, and a willingness to admit at least some *degree* of ignorance about God. All the scriptures have passages that speak about our limited knowledge. But they also have sayings about spiritual peace, *inner* peace. Paul speaks about the peace that passes understanding (Phil 4:7). If we have genuine inner peace, we don’t feel the need to show how our religion is better than somebody else’s. Once we practice that, we can get along with other religions.

And they might ask us where we get our inner peace. That’s great, and then we can testify, but in an interfaith setting, we don’t volunteer it if we are not asked.

Our Gospel passage ends with “All flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). How will this happen? Is it through a universal recognition of Jesus’ truth? Or will it be through sensitive interfaith work that creates respect all around? Or will it be both?—The *spiritual* peace that comes when you have let Christ be formed in you, plusthe *social* peace that comes with practicing humility and recognizing that nobody has control over God. Maybe it comes when we learn both to be believers and to be diplomats.

Jesus said “be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matt 10:16 KJV). So we need to be *wise* as believers and *harmless* as diplomats.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9). If we are peacemakers, then we have started with hope, and we are destined for joy.

If we are peacemakers, then we have first made peace with God.