

“Draw Near To Peace”

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First Baptist Church of Birmingham

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Luke 3:1-6

CHILDREN’S TIME

This here is a trumpet. Not only is it a trumpet, but it is my mom’s trumpet that she played when she was in high school 60 years ago. I don’t know a lot about the trumpet, but I know that it is used in ceremonies to announce the arrival of someone very important like a king, queen or president. The song that is played is called the “Fanfare.” You might have heard a fanfare in a movie.

The trumpet was even used like this in Bible times. In the book of 1 Kings in the Old Testament of the Bible, we can read about when Solomon was crowned as the King of Israel. It says that they blew the trumpet and shouted “God save king Solomon” (1 Kings 1:34).

The word “fanfare” is also used to describe any showy celebration around a special event. You can imagine that there is always a lot of fanfare around the coming of a king, isn’t there? Well, maybe most of the time, but not always. There wasn’t much fanfare surrounding the coming of Jesus. There were

no trumpets and no one shouting “God save the king!” The Bible tells us that there was only a man named John, dressed in a camel’s hair coat, who shouted out in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord.”

That wasn’t much of a fanfare for any king, and it sure wasn’t much of a fanfare for someone as important as Jesus. As we look forward to the celebration of Jesus’ birth, we can do it with great fanfare with our celebration here at church and at home with our families.

A few minutes ago we lit the second candle on our Advent wreath. This is the candle of peace for our King, Jesus, who was called the Prince of Peace.

SERMON

Draw near to peace. Remember also that peace is not only the absence of war and freedom from violence, but speaks of harmony and a state of well being. In the Hebrew, shalom is the word for peace, so when the ancient Jews spoke of peace they were talking about wholeness and completeness of being.

Hold onto that thought through the sermon today.

Anne Lamott, the American writer, speaker, and teacher, wrote a book after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, titled Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair. In that book, she endeavored to make sense of such a senseless tragedy.

She wrote “There can be meaning without things making sense.”

We face those situations so often in life, don't we? Things happen that may be terrifying — things we just cannot understand. They are beyond us, and yet inside us something is churning to make it mean something for our lives.

These events might be something that our society and country is trying to deal with — for example, senseless and horrific school shootings like at Sandy Hook Elementary, or at Tree Of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, or one of the others we have had in recent years.

Or it might be the loss of a loved one who died all too young by a freak accident, a terminal illness, or condition from birth.

It could be a divorce you didn't want ... but happened anyway.

It could be some form of abuse by someone in your family, and you

feel such shame that you haven't been able to say a word to anyone.

It might be a big, long-lasting event, like the ongoing wars in the Middle East, or other place around the world where innocent people are routinely killed day after day, generation after generation with no end in sight.

These things simply don't make any sense to us. These are the situations that have us yelling to God “Why!” But there are no easy answers.

Ann Lamott relayed a story in her book from her pastor about a sparrow lying in the street with its legs straight up in the air. It was sweating under its little feathery wings. A massive warhorse walked up to the bird and asked, “What on earth are you doing?”

The bird replied, “I heard the sky was falling, and I wanted to help.” The mighty horse laughed a big, loud, sneering horse laugh, and said, “Do you really think you are going to hold back the sky, with those scrawny little legs?”

And the sparrow answered, “One does what one can.”

This could be a definition of hope and a step toward peace — just

being available to do what one can and trusting God to do the rest.

I believe that God wants to break into each of our lives to teach us about hope and peace — right here and right now. Perhaps what is needed is for us to slow down enough to listen and really hear God speaking. God's message of peace is floating on the wind that blows all around us. Can you hear it?

Advent is the time we must wake up to be present in this moment — to live the messy life God has given us right here and right now.

READ LUKE 3:1-6

We have had a lot of hurricanes hit the southern and south-eastern United States in recent years. Meteorologists watch these storms that brew out in the ocean and when their projections determine that one of them will hit land, they blast warnings by way of TV, radio, internet and other media. Beyond the media, there often are people who hit the streets and go door to door in critical areas to announce to the people that impending danger is approaching and that it is urgent to leave in order to save their lives.

John the Baptist was one of those people who went out to declare

impending danger to the people. And the people were listening.

Why were they listening?

Well, Rome had ruled the Mediterranean basin for about 100 years, but only about 20 some years prior did a Roman governor first get assigned to a post in Jerusalem. Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor had died about 15 years prior, and now a ruthless emperor named Tiberius had taken his place.

Herod the Great had two sons, Antipas and Philip, who were ruling as figureheads in the north. They still reigned, as virtually all Roman governors did, through fear, intimidation and oppression. But these two were not taken seriously — because they were part of a royal political dynasty.

However, Tiberius, down in Jerusalem was the real deal. Not only did he mean business, but he was ruthless and the people feared him.

There were riots and rebellions that would flare up from time to time and some of these were substantial. But the Roman forces were massive and steam-rolled all of them.

However, as numbers of resistors grew within certain groups, like the Jews, it caused a bit of concern for the Roman governors.

You can imagine that the Jewish people who were restless and tired of being pinned under the boot of empire were looking for salvation. They were looking for justice and redemption. They were looking for peace like their scriptures had proclaimed through the prophets.

They looked forward to the renewal of a covenant with their God, who would free them from slavery, like in stories of old. They only had a vague idea of what this new freedom would look like, but they had a pretty clear notion that it would include the downfall of Rome's rule.

When John started preaching in the desert, masses of people were all too ready to listen.

"This is it!" we can hear them chanting. "This is our day of deliverance!"

John was baptizing them in the Jordan River, and this was a powerful symbol for them because the biggest, and most important story from their past was when God delivered the people out of slavery in Egypt and God took them

through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness and then through the waters of the Jordan into the promised land.

Their ancestors biggest sin was idolatry which landed them in slavery. But the prophets' message was to repent and turn back to God who would save them.

So, it just fit for them that John was baptizing them in the Jordan with a baptism of repentance. They knew they needed this. Justice and peace were right around the corner. They would hang on every word of John's and do what he instructed them to do.

They would do this because they longed for the weapons of violence to be thrown down, for the oppression to cease. They longed for the day when they might be free from the Romans and free from their sin of idolatry. They longed for God's forgiveness and to be restored as a people.

They longed for peace ... and God would bring it.

And peace is often found as we sort out what is truth. Listen to Sarah Are's words...

draw near to truth

By Sarah Are

Truth is like sand—
slipping through my fingers
every time I turn on the news.
So day after day, I gather the dust at my feet
and build sand castles of the world I want to see—
Sand castle cities with fair housing, no walls,
families united and a name like Love.

And when the waves threaten to tear them down,
I will rebuild.
For the truest thing I know is that
God is love,
and love is stronger than fear.

So at the end of the day, if you need me,
I'll be taking sand-soaked alternative truths
and turning them into sand castles of a better world—
A world rooted in love,
which I will keep building
until "love," and "truth" and "God" all sound like synonyms.