

December 5, 2021
Second Sunday in Advent

Prelude

Lighting the Candle of Peace Harold and Becky Bias

*Hymn 88 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Prayer of the Day

**May this eternal truth be always on our hearts:
that the God who breathed this world into being,
placed the stars in the heavens,
and designed a butterfly's wing...
is the God who entrusted his life
to the care of ordinary people
and became vulnerable that we might know
how strong is the power of Love...
a mystery so deep it is impossible to grasp,
a mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.
May this beauty and mystery work within us, calling us to full lives- loving, serving, and
growing in grace, as we seek and extend forgiveness in Jesus' name. Amen.**

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Friends, Jesus knows our hearts and our intentions. He is always more willing to forgive than we are ready to ask for help. With Christ's help, any misguided steps can be corrected and turned around for good. Believe the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. Be at peace.

First Reading Malachi 3:1-6

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Luke 3:1-6

The Morning Message

I read a story this week that captured the scripture readings in just the right way for us today.

The Rev, Nathaniel Phillips, of the Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan* writes that one summer he led a mission trip to his hometown in Maine. His group had a day off and they were headed to the beach for a day of rest, relaxation, and fellowship.

He writes, “My wife is there, too, with my five-year-old daughter and our baby who is just a few weeks old. My wife is driving our car to the lake and I am guiding the group so I am in the church van. I am riding as a passenger, offering directions to the driver on our way through town to the lake. We will have a picnic there, we’ll play Frisbee, we’ll swim.”

They must be much harder than this preacher. Have you been to Maine? Even in the summer, it’s sweater weather.

Phillips continues with his story: “As this is my hometown, I’ve seen the Farmington roadside go by thousands of times, and I tell our driver to stay straight on Route 4 until we hit the next town. All the familiarity seeps in, I am drifting...”

“As we pass the diner, my eyes lock on the spinning blue lights of a police car. And there, in front of the diner, I see my wife. She is running with purpose around our car to the backseat where I know our three-week-old baby girl is strapped in. The police car is behind hers and the officer stands, looking helpless, next to the car. An ambulance brackets our vehicle from the front. Panic shoots through me. “That’s my wife,” I say to nobody in particular.

We need to turn around. We need to turn around!

The most dreadful possibilities race through his mind in the seconds it takes to turn around and go back to the scene. Was there an accident? Did the baby choke on something? And he prays, please God, let everything be OK.

And by turning around, they became fully informed about what had happened.

He says this incident reminds him of how we receive the good news about our lives and faith. People tend to talk about choosing to embrace the Christian faith, or any other faith, as though it is an intellectual exercise.

Our Reformed and Presbyterian understanding is that we don’t get to choose whether God loves us, but we do get to chose whether we will turn around from whatever path we are on, like Phillips turned the church van around that day in Maine, and live into that marvelous love of God.

We don't get to decide whether God loves this or that person, whether or not they are worthy of love, but we do get to help the world turn around and live into that love. Living into God's love should take us down the road that leads to peace. Going down that road often calls for change.

This is John's message in the gospel text. He calls the people to repent, turn around, for the kingdom of heaven is near. This account is also found in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew uses the Greek word, *metanoia*, which is translated "repent." *Meta* means change and *nous* means mind. So, John is calling us to change our minds...go in another direction.

This idea of turning around is not new to our New Testament characters. In Hebrew, we find the word, *shuv*. It is translated "repent," and it, too, means to turn around, to change our ways.

Recently, Ed and his brother were watching a basketball game. Their team was lagging behind. They were headed toward a loss when they should have been winning considering the team they were playing. I heard one of the spectators shout at the television, "You've got to turn this around, boys!"

Indeed, they needed to change their strategy before they were defeated. Apparently that was the message they heard in the locker room at half time. Because when they took the floor for the second half, they turned the game around and won it.

We aren't all basketball players. But we all make decisions every day that define our lives. What kind of emotional climate do we set for the day? What face will we wear when we greet the other people who live in our home? How will we approach the day's tasks? How will we respond to an emergency? Or a disappointment? Or the evening news?

Most of us will not make decisions on the scale that the governor or President face each day. But we will be affected by their choices. We all hope our civic leaders take us down the road that leads to success, that brings us a sense of satisfaction and well-being. Sometimes those choices bring us peace and order and sometimes they produce anxiety.

We make decisions every day. We hope to do good, right? We have worthy intentions. We interact with others all the time. Again, we have honorable motives. Here's what I hope you will take away today: we don't always get it right. And if we don't, we can make it right by turning things around. And if we can't turn things around, we can still seek forgiveness. God's mercies are new every morning and sure as the sunrise.

When we lay our heads on our pillows at night, we don't want to toss and turn, worrying about the day's events, the day's choices. We want rest. We need peace.

What are some ways we can find peace now, today? I can only speak for myself. I'll crack the door on the climate in our house. I have been known to wait until everyone goes to bed and then clean the house, or do the laundry or some other task because it is unacceptable to me to go to bed if there are dishes in the sink or crumbs on the floor. I am as addicted to neatness as some are to alcohol. I have learned that they are both destructive. Both are methods that are meant to ease anxiety. But, in reality, both rob their practitioners of peace.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that, "The real turning point in our lives is less likely to be the day we win the election or get married, than the morning we decide to mail the letter or the afternoon we watch the woods fill up with snow. The real turning point in human history is less apt to be the day the wheel is invented or Rome falls, than the day a child is born in a stable."

Can you imagine, if we had been in that church van in Maine the day Nathaniel Phillips saw his wife's car surrounded by emergency vehicles? We, too would have been compelled to stop and turn around. We would have turned around for that baby.

And we would have found what Nathaniel did that day: that the baby had worked herself up into such a lather that his wife was concentrating more on taking care of the baby's needs than the speed she was driving. We've probably all been there. She was near the diner when a police officer pulled her over. She pulled into the diner parking lot right behind an ambulance already parked there. Apparently the EMTs were taking their breakfast break.

Nathaniel was compelled to turn around so he could be with his wife and children that morning in Maine. He had to turn around.

So, what about us? Can we turn around from whatever is distracting us to be fully present for the baby in the manger? When will we stop, turn around, and think about the life of that baby? Will we consider how he grew in wisdom and stature, accepted his mission from God, his father, and eventually exchanged his swaddling clothes for a robe that was gambled over and a crown of thorns on the head his mother had kissed?

These things he did for us. These things he did for love. These things he did to bring us peace. And even if we don't choose him, he chooses us. His arms are always open. In them we will always find our home.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

O God, our Peace,

On this Sunday of preparation, this Sunday that celebrates your peace,

help us so to live that peace may be found in our lives, homes, workplaces, and our church.

May we do our part to usher in peace in the world and in the Village of Barboursville.

Where we have sinned, move us to repentance,

and help us to muster the courage to make amends with those we've harmed in thought, word, or deed. Where others have sinned against us, may we find a sense of forgiveness and trust that you will reconcile all things in your time.

We pray for all those who face violence daily, for all in need, for those near and far away who are sick or troubled, for all suffering due to the pandemic, for those who mourn, for all leaders everywhere, that they may seek the welfare of the city, nation, and the world.

Make us all new in the One to whom John pointed, Jesus, our Savior and friend, praying as he taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings, including our pledges for mission and ministry in 2022.

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

Most Generous God,

You have entrusted us with gifts and asked us to use them in advancing your kingdom.

And, so, today, we bring gifts and pledges for the coming year.

**We offer ourselves, our lives, our hopes and fears,
our dollars and our hours.**

We commit ourselves to work for your world, to love and serve and celebrate wherever you call.

We ask your blessing on this church, seeking to follow you in Jesus' name and in his manner, that our gifts and our efforts may multiply and we might grow in faith, hope, and love. Amen.

*Hymn 106 Prepare the Way, O Zion

*Blessing

Go now: wait and work for the coming of the Lord.

In the wild places prepare a straight path for our God.

Lead lives of holiness and godliness,

strive to be found at peace,

and speak freely of the Lord's comfort and promise.

And may God, our shepherd, gather you in loving arms,

may Christ Jesus reconcile justice and peace within you;

and may the Spirit fill you with holy intentions.

*Hymn 91 While We Are Waiting, Come verse 1

*Postlude