A Word of Peace

The Second Sunday in Advent (C); December 9, 2012
Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA
Pastor Anita R. Warner

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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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.
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.’”

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.
The Second Sunday in Advent when we lift up Peace is also the Sunday we hear from John the Baptist, who is calling for repentance.

About 80 years ago, theologian Arthur W. Pink [(1886-1952), “Signs of the Times” in *Studies in the Scripture*] wrote,
“Salvation is by grace, grace alone… Nevertheless, Divine grace is not exercised at the expense of holiness, for it never compromises with sin. It is also true that salvation is a free gift, but an empty hand must receive it, and not a hand which still tightly grasps the world…. A heart that is steeled in rebellion cannot savingly believe; it must first be broken ….. Those preachers who tells sinners they may be saved without forsaking their idols, without repenting, without surrendering to the Lordship or Christ, are as erroneous and dangerous as others who insist that salvation is by works and that heaven must be earned by our own efforts.”

So it is that, as Luther said, to love one’s neighbor means to speak to her or him when they are sinning and admonish them in love.

Speaking to someone directly about their sin is difficult. I know someone really loves me with neighbor-love if they will take the risk to tell me directly my sin, or tell me directly of my participation in the sinful ways of the world.

I made a new friend last summer and was so blessed to spend time with Pastor Mitri Raheb in Bethlehem. Mitri is Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, a medium-size church community in Bethlehem whose vision in outreach ministries now touch 60,000 people each year in Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank of Palestine.

In his book Bethlehem Besieged (Augsburg Fortress, 2004), he wrote this
“It was Sunday morning, December 1, 2002, the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of the season of preparation for Christmas. Around that time of the day, downtown Bethlehem is usually crowded with young men in the jeans and women in the beautifully embroidered traditional dresses. The voices of the shopkeepers are very loud as they try to sell fresh fruits and vegetables.
“On that morning, and as usual on Sunday mornings, I was sitting in my office overlooking the main street. What I saw was unusual. The city was empty, the streets were deserted. No shops were open. No people were out walking. No voices or other noises could be heard, only odd silence, a kind of silence that was crying toward heaven. I thought of the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote these words:

How lonely sits the city that was once full of people!  
How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.  
She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks. Lamentations 1:1-2

“The silence was disrupted every now and then by the sound of two Israeli armored vehicles roaming the streets. Mixed with that was the voice of an Israeli soldier announcing curfew with a megaphone, saying "Mannou’ attajawul," which means, “Moving is forbidden. Leaving home is forbidden.” In effect, they were telling us, “You are prisoners. Stay where you are; otherwise you are violating the ‘holy’ and strict military rules and will be put in prison.” When curfew is imposed, schools close, businesses stop functioning, and clinics shut their doors. It is a state of wholesale imprisonment. The curfew that Israel imposes on many Palestinian towns and villages is in effect twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and it affects all aspects of life. In the case of Bethlehem, the curfew affects 135,000 citizens, half of whom are children. During 2002 Bethlehem was under curfew for almost four months.
“Once the two Israeli military armored vehicles announcing the curfew left the square on which our church is located, I sneaked out to ring the bells of Christmas Lutheran Church at 10:00 AM. Although the distance between my office and the sanctuary is less than thirty yards, it was still very dangerous to defy the curfew which takes place under such circumstances. The church member who takes care of our church and the bells lives half a mile away. There was no way he could come that day. I rang the bells, calling people for worship. For me, this was an act of nonviolent resistance. We will not let the Israeli military steal from us the sound of bells calling for worship.

“As I rang the bells, I had little faith that anyone would show up. Knowing how Palestinians caught violating the Israeli-imposed curfew are humiliated, my expectations for that Sunday were humble. Every Palestinian is familiar with the stories about Israeli soldiers who ordered people caught violating the curfew to take off their clothes and go back home naked. Some Palestinians were taken prisoner by the soldiers when out during curfew, some had to pay thousands of shekels as penalty, while others were beaten, humiliated, or even tortured.

“At 10:30, the Reverend Sandra Olewine and I met at the church’s entrance for worship. Although we weren’t sure if anyone would be able to make it to church on that Sunday, we still put on our purple Advent stoles. We rang the bells for a second time, marking the start of the worship service. Seven people had already gathered in the sanctuary. One of the young people asked
if the day really was the first Sunday of Advent, since he didn’t see the traditional Advent wreath with its four candles for the four Sundays of Advent. Because Bethlehem had been under curfew for ten days, we had been unable to get pine branches to weave the wreath. We had to miss the music of our organ, too, since our organist lives nearly a mile away from the church and could not make it under such a curfew. Yet, even under curfew and without a wreath or organ music, we still wanted to celebrate the Advent or Coming of the Lord.

“At 10:40, I looked at the pews and couldn’t believe my eyes. Twenty-seven people had gathered in the sanctuary. I knew how dangerous it was to be on the streets. However, more than two dozen people, young and old, had come to celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. On that Sunday, those members of Christmas Lutheran Church had decided to leave the homes they had been stuck in for many days, homes that were becoming more like tombs guarded by soldiers, to go out and worship the one Lord and live the power of resurrection.

“As we gathered, we read the words of St. Paul assigned for the first Sunday of Advent [that year]:

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Romans 13:12

“How challenging and comforting were those words.

“The words are challenging, since the “night” of the thirty-five-year occupation has been very long and feels endless. The day of freedom and dignity seems very far away. How else can we explain the arrogance of the Israeli occupation, which reoccupied Bethlehem shortly before the seasons of Advent and Christmas....? If they wish, they can smash the “little town of Bethlehem.” It is too little, compared with the might of their tanks.

“Yet there is comforting good news in St. Paul’s words – the night has lost its power. The gospel calls us and empowers us to cast off the works of darkness and occupation. The light of right is stronger than the power of might.

“The presence of the church members, in spite of the curfew, was the best expression of that light. When confronted with the choice between obeying
the commands of a military occupation or the commandments of their Lord, the church members chose to “obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts. 5:29). They made their choice, knowing that they might pay a heavy price.”

Dr. Mitri Raheb is one of the authors of the document known as Kairos Palestine. In that document the leaders of the Christian churches in Palestine write:

[6.1] “Our word to the Churches of the world is firstly a word of gratitude for the solidarity you have shown toward us in word, deed and presence among us. It is a word of praise for the many Churches and Christians who support the right of the Palestinian people for self determination. It is a message of solidarity with those Christians and Churches who have suffered because of their advocacy for law and justice.

“However, it is also a call to repentance; to revisit fundamentalist theological positions that support certain unjust political options with regard to the Palestinian people. It is a call to stand alongside the oppressed and preserve the word of God as good news for all rather than to turn it into a weapon with which to slay the oppressed. The word of God is a word of love for all His creation. God is not the ally of one against the other, nor the opponent of one in the face of the other. God is the Lord of all and loves all, demanding justice from all and issuing to all of us the same commandments. We ask our sister Churches not to offer a theological cover-up for the
injustice we suffer, for the sin of the occupation imposed upon us. Our question to our brothers and sisters in the Churches today is: Are you able to help us get our freedom back, for this is the only way you can help the two peoples attain justice, peace, security and love?”

In this season of Advent, the real preparation for Christmas is not only wishing hope and peace but also acting for real hope and peace in this world. “True repentance responds to God and treats fellow humans justly… This is what God desires of those who know [Christ] is present and coming: a concern for God is expressed through concern for others.” (Bock, Luke).

And so, with St. Paul, I offer this prayer for you:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best (Philippians 1:9-10a).