

## SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT: PEACE

### “Speak Your Peace: Preparing the Way for the Lord in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

**G**ood evening church family. It is a pleasure to be in community with you today as we consider God’s radical mission and vision of peace. Please join me in a moment of prayer:

*Dear Lord, we come together today to thank you for your steadfastness and care. Thank you for your peace that surpasses all understanding. We invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts to inspire our prophetic imaginations of peace. Please bless what is said here today and allow the truth of your kingdom, of your new community, to permeate our lives and transform our relationships. In Jesus’s name we pray, Amen.*

Church family, we find ourselves in evermore trying times. We find ourselves in a country that is becoming increasingly polarized as tensions between political parties rise. More and more people are throwing their hands up, waving their white flags of surrender, in the face of unprecedented evil. The commodification of life has violently robbed many of the opportunity to dream, live peacefully, and congregate, as countless people become subsumed by a bone-chilling sense of fear that is allusive yet concretely felt. The deafening silence from those in power bears down on us and threatens to wipe-out the very experiences of oppression and violence that have been endured by our individual bodies, our children’s bodies, and our collective body. Quite frankly, all seems lost. Yet, in the face of this far-reaching division, God is calling His people to radically resist the powers of evil and fearlessly speak their peace.

To consider what this charge may look like for us today, let us turn in our Bibles to Luke 1:68-79. I will be reading from the New Living Translation:

- <sup>69</sup> He has sent us a mighty Savior<sup>[a]</sup>  
from the royal line of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> just as he promised  
through his holy prophets long ago.  
<sup>71</sup> Now we will be saved from our enemies  
and from all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup> He has been merciful to our ancestors  
by remembering his sacred covenant—  
<sup>73</sup> the covenant he swore with an oath  
to our ancestor Abraham.  
<sup>74</sup> We have been rescued from our enemies  
so we can serve God without fear,  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
for as long as we live.  
<sup>76</sup> “And you, my little son,  
will be called the prophet of the Most High,

because you will prepare the way for the Lord.  
77 You will tell his people how to find salvation  
through forgiveness of their sins.  
78 Because of God's tender mercy,  
the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,<sup>[b]</sup>  
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
and to guide us to the path of peace."

It is important for us to note that Luke is writing to an audience that is experiencing persecution within the context of Roman imperial power and mourning Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The third Gospel in the New Testament is addressed to Theophilus ("Lover of God"), scholars believe him to be a man of rank who has become associated with the church, but doubts whether in fact he really belongs in this racially mixed and heavily persecuted community.<sup>1</sup>

Now watch this, the beauty and genius of the living word is that it can be read in the historical-present. We can choose to give the text a renewed sense of urgency by reading it as though it were addressed to us, Theophilus, "Lovers of God."

Verses 68-79, which are collectively known as the "Benedictus," comprise Zechariah's radical prophecy for Israel and his son, John (a.k.a. John the Baptist). Zechariah, who was struck mute because of his disbelief in the angel Gabriel's prophecy concerning John's birth, regains the faculty of speech upon witnessing the fulfillment of the angel's prophecy. In his song, Zechariah foretells the coming of Jesus Christ and characterizes it as fulfilling the previous covenants that God made with Israel in the Old Testament. He also describes John's destiny and mission of preparing the way for the Lord, which will guide us to the path of peace. Church family, today let us consider how we can prepare the way for the Lord in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by speaking our peace. Turn to your neighbor and say, "Speak your peace."

In thinking about God's mission and vision of peace, let us first think about the antonym or the opposite of peace. Some of us may think that the opposite of peace is violence or war but let's dig deeper to find the root of these phenomena: evil. So, let us now consider evil as the opposite of peace. Think about the line that we say in the Lord's Prayer: "Deliver us from evil" or "Deliver us from the evil one." When we say this, we are acknowledging that the evil power provokes the evil and violence in the human heart and history.<sup>2</sup> If we think of evil, personified by the Evil One, Satan, as the opposite of peace we can begin to understand how we as citizens of the Kingdom of God can overcome the evil one by speaking our peace.

Today, I believe the Evil One's greatest trick is manifested in the bystander effect. This next story contains violent imagery, so please be warned and take any necessary precautions.

Imagine heading home from work late one night and finally pulling up in the alley behind your apartment to park your car. It's around 3 o'clock in the morning. As you walk to the front of your apartment

1 Adapted from the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

2 Paraphrased from William M. Swartley, "Peace and Violence in the New Testament: Definition and Methodology" from *Struggles for Shalom: Peace and Violence Across the Testaments*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 143.

complex you see an unknown man walking in your direction. You run to the apartment complex but can't manage to get inside before he comes up and stabs you in the back twice. You yell out, "Oh my God, he stabbed me! Help Me!" You know that some of your neighbors must hear you, since you're not more than 10 meters away from their apartment windows. But why hasn't anyone come out to help you? A neighbor finally shouts, "Leave them alone!" and when the attacker flees you slowly make your way to the apartment's rear entrance. A locked door prevents you from getting into the apartment and as you lie there, barely conscious and out of sight, the attacker returns, stabs you several more times, rapes you, and steals your money.

The tragic murder of Kitty Genovese, which took place on March 13, 1964 in Brooklyn, New York led some behavioral psychologists to attribute her neighbor's indifference to the bystander effect. Psychology Today states that the bystander effect occurs when the presence of others discourages an individual from intervening in an emergency situation. Some psychologists believe that this happens because there is a perceived *diffusion of responsibility*. So, what this means is that onlookers are less likely to step in if there are other people around who seem like they might stop to help. Sometimes we may feel the effects of this *diffusion of responsibility* at home. Like when you might think your roommate or partner locked the door and they assumed that you did. You call them up or text them frantically, "Hey! Did you lock the door?" Only for them to respond, "...No, I thought you did." Fearful that we could be to blame or worse, *inconvenienced*, we quickly justify our own indifference by shifting the responsibility onto someone else. Perhaps Kitty Genovese would be alive today if, instead of simply phoning the police, one of her neighbors had also left the safety of their unit, unlocked the apartment door, and helped to stop Kitty's bleeding stab wounds?

Church family, this is the major ethical dilemma that we all face today. The major obstacle to overcome in order to speak our peace and prepare the way for the Lord. Our entire society is suffering from the evil manifestations of the bystander effect. We withhold our aid, our help, and our attention, because... it's not our responsibility. We will do anything BUT admit the role we played. We skim headlines that pop up on our social media timelines through a lens of indifference to shield ourselves from blame, from culpability. Every once in a while, we jump, or shake our heads, or even shed a tear, but we just keep on scrolling by because, "Hey, it's unfortunate but it's really not *my* problem. Besides, this new meme is trending, and I really need to get more followers." We are opting for a reality that seems real, has all the facsimiles of real life EXCEPT the stuff we don't want to see, the stuff of suffering, the stuff of gross injustice. We have bought into the myth of American Exceptionalism.

Have you ever left the movie theaters after seeing a 3D movie and kept your little plastic 3D glasses on? Your vision is reduced to this weird, blurry haze of red and blue. Sooner or later you realize that you can't really use 3D glasses in real life. In a similar sense, you can't take an artificial tool or concept and successfully apply it to reality. This is what we do when we talk about peace without accountability, without repentance. This is a sort of abstract peace that exists in euphemisms and cultural idioms; that glosses over the experiences of the oppressed. A sort of peace that is the exclusive property of elite business people and politicians. We would rather sport some cheesy 3D glasses, willing ourselves into a pseudo-realistic environment that seems real but actually misses the mark, just so we don't run any

risk of losing our personal peace; just so we don't have to admit that we could have done something to help. We are complicit with evil if we decide to sacrifice God's path of peace for our own selfish sense of peace.

But, I am here to tell you today, that we don't have to continue to live as prisoners to the evil one. We can be free from the blurry 3D glasses that block us from experiencing the fulness of life. We can follow John the Baptist's example and prepare the way for the Lord by speaking our peace. Luke 3:3 tells us that John the Baptist "went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John had faith in the treaty of peace that was to be manifested through Jesus's blood shed on the cross and his triumph over the evil power of death. So, John preached that we can enter into the treaty of peace by repenting of our sins and turning to God for forgiveness. In the context of the bystander effect, John is telling us that we can combat the diffusion of responsibility by being accountable for our sins and proclaiming a new course of action—God's way; God's path of peace.

Now, Church family, let it be known that the consequence of turning from God's path of peace is evil. We are playing ourselves when we refuse to repent out of fear of punishment or embarrassment, etc. By not repenting of our sins, we allow the enemy access to keep us silent using the age-old tools of shame and guilt. We are sleeping soundly in our safety and comfort of our little apartments as our neighbors are dying right under our noses. Church family, no longer can we remain asleep! No longer can we turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the suffering of our neighbors! We must speak our peace. We must repent individually and collectively of our sins of complicity if we wish to walk on God's path of peace.

Our government threw tear gas on thousands of migrants fleeing the violence in their countries that our government helped to create. We must SPEAK OUR PEACE by repenting of our violent international policies and demanding the rights of migrants. Let us not forget that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were refugees, migrants fleeing from the violence perpetrated by King Herod! There have been more than 90 mass shootings in the US since 1982.<sup>3</sup> We must SPEAK OUR PEACE by repenting of our fanatic defense of the second amendment and demanding for gun reform! At least 128 transgender people – the vast majority transgender women of color—have been killed in the last five years. We must SPEAK OUR PEACE by repenting of our vicious intolerance and standing against the violence that puts transgender people at risk! Worldwide, it's estimated that there are 4.5 million victims of sex trafficking.<sup>4</sup> We must SPEAK OUR PEACE by repenting of our silence and working to end all forms of human slavery! The U.S. police have shot and killed 857 people this year alone.<sup>5</sup> We must SPEAK OUR PEACE by repenting of our blind trust of law enforcement and demanding top-down police reform!

As we take up the mantle of speaking our peace, just as John the Baptist preached in his day, take heart and always remember what the Lucan scripture tells us,

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3 <http://time.com/4965022/deadliest-mass-shooting-us-history/>

4 <http://www.endslaverynow.org/learn/slavery-today/sex-trafficking>

5 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?utm\\_term=.6b1ff3d914ca](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?utm_term=.6b1ff3d914ca)

“Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

God loves us so much that he sacrificed his only son for our salvation. So, no longer will we bear the burden that is the cancerous guilt feeding upon our collective conscious! We can acknowledge and turn away from the sins of our pasts to move into the promises of peace in our futures.

No one person has all the answers to achieving worldwide peace. In fact, my vision of peace is severely limited and incomplete. Why? Because, it takes all of us! It takes *each and every one* of us speaking our peace for all of us to move along God’s path of peace. Now, do know that the process of peacebuilding will be a continual and complex process. It will be met with violent response, but our God has assured us in Isaiah 54:17 that, “No weapon formed against us shall prosper!” Church family, I stand here to share the good news despite our dark times. If we all repent of our own roles as bystanders, of our own diffusions of responsibility, and turn toward working to promote radical visions of peace by speaking our peace, we can begin to collectively prepare the way for the Lord in this day and in this hour. Amen.

**Scripture:** Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

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**Brief Introduction:** “Khortlan Becton will be graduating from Vanderbilt Divinity School this December with a Master of Theological Studies degree. She previously attended the University of Alabama, where she earned a bachelor’s degree double-majoring in Religious Studies and African American studies.”