“The Eyes Have It”

Luke 3:1-6

Part II of VI in “A Light to the Nations” Advent Sermon Series

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December 5, 2021

From the Pulpit
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Prayer for Illumination: Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

This Advent, like other Advent seasons before is a “getting ready” season. It can so easily become a season that is all about doing. Mostly, we get ready by working really hard – and this may be especially true this year as we anticipate holiday celebrations that look a bit more like what we used to do before the pandemic, when the time leading up to Christmas was a time to cook, clean, decorate, study, take finals, rehearse, attend concerts, write cards, mail cards, throw parties, go to parties, and shop for just the right gifts for family and friends.¹

There is a common understanding among us that this is a very busy time.

So what a relief to come to worship on the second Sunday of Advent and hear the promise of PEACE, which is the theme for this day.

Yes, isn’t that just what we need –

peace: some quiet time to put our feet up and rest
peace: an end to political bickering and partisan one-upmanship
peace: the absence of horrific conflict in places around the world.

What a relief to come here and discover that embedded in this season is God’s promise of PEACE.

Which begs the question: if the second Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of peace, then why is it also the Sunday when we hear from John the Baptist – that fiery preacher who referred to his congregants by the river as a “brood of vipers”?

His words just don’t sound very peaceful. They sound more like John is picking a fight with God’s people. According to John, it’s not their ancestry that matters to God – that they are, as he puts it, “children of Abraham.” What really matters is their ACTIONS.

The Quaker Civil Rights activist Howard Thurman lived from 1899 until 1991. One of his best known works is a poem titled “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
  To find the lost,
  To heal the broken,
  To feed the hungry,
  To release the prisoner,
  To rebuild the nations,
  To bring peace among brothers,
  To make music in the heart. 2
For us, the song of the angels hasn’t yet rung out,
the star has barely appeared in the sky,
the kings and princes haven’t left home,
and the shepherds haven’t received their invitation to the stable
but today’s text calls us to look ahead to what Thurman calls the work of Christmas.

Apparently, getting ready for Christmas is NOT the most important work because Christmas is not the goal;
it is merely the next stage in the ongoing transformation God wants for the world, for all the ways God calls our lives to more clearly reflect God’s love and mercy.

So if we spend these weeks only doing and not heeding the words of John the Baptist, not only will we not know peace, we will never have the energy to attend to the real work of Christmas.

In order to do any of that which Thurman suggests:

- we must slow down,
- we must look with different eyes,
- we must listen to the prophet’s voice.

For God’s voice, woven into the voices of the prophets, is what love sounds like.

God will be known and heard,
seen and experienced.

John announces what Israel longs for and what the world needs: to see God.
Indeed the world itself will make room for its Creator. All that has obstructed the sight of God will be removed.

Today, both Isaiah and John the Baptist reminds us that preparing a way for God requires some rebalancing – as Isaiah puts it,

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

– all will be made to angle toward the divine life present in the world.

John the Baptist says it a little differently, but he’s telling us something similar,

to look at where our lives are out of balance,
to make adjustments,
to figure out where we have done too much
or taken too much or acquired too much or said too much,
and to know that we can stop doing,
we can give away,
we can make do with less,
we can listen instead of speak,
we can take small but meaningful actions that impact the challenges of our time.

We do all this by first making space, not just in our homes but in our hearts,

space where Christ mi.and bring us the very peace for which we desperately long,
peace which names our brokenness 
so that we can see and join in God’s work of becoming whole again.

Steve Garnaas Holmes reflects on this in his poem, “Prepare the Way”:

Enough of your junk drawer clutter 
bucket of old used punctuation 
heartthrob amusement ride of distraction. 
Prayer is a snow shovel. 
You plow it all aside. 
All of it. 
Clear a space. 
Admit it: your heart is a hoarder. 
Clean out your piety’s basement. 
You don’t build the way, 
don’t accrue it. 
You empty it. 
Rough made smooth, 
crooked made straight, 
bussy made empty. 
Empty it all. 
Silence the noise, the chorus, the committee, the crowd. 
The empty place is not long, 
stretching away. 
It’s just right there, around you, 
a circle of light, 
empty air,
silence—not what you hear,
but how you listen,
what you practice.

Silence.

Now there’s a way.

Wait.
For the Coming One,
who speaks silence,
who blesses the emptiness,
the Presence who is the negative space itself…³

There will be no need for an alternative route to God, no need for more maps to the Divine, because God is coming to us, clarified the way and sharpened the view.

John announces a new question.

No longer do we need to ask, “Where can God be found?”

Now the only question is,

“Do you see the God who is coming to you?”

Amen.

¹ Rev. Amy Starr Redwine, A sermon every Sunday, podcast, 2021. Amy is a colleague and pastor/head of staff at First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA.
³ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Prepare the Way,” Email Devotional, December 5, 2018. https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/79e323399tgcb8a3r3bmezwtecsaz7t