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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:67-79

5 December 2021

Dare to Imagine: Peace

*Opening Prayer:* Let us pray, God of wholeness and reconciliation, we come to you with open hearts and lives as we ask seek your peace. Peace in our innermost being that comes from your Holy Spirit, your very breath. Peace in our minds as we wait for your appearing, your advent. Peace for our bodies and your creation as we all have seen or experienced different forms of violence in our lives. Enliven our imaginations that we could begin to see the possibility of peace in us, around us, and through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Message:* When I was young, probably between 8 and 12 years old, I remember hearing stories from my parents about how I was a sleep-walker. I, of course, do not remember many of these experiences, but I do remember one in particular. I needed to go to the bathroom, so I got out of bed. But when I tried to walk the usual way to the bathroom, I kept running into something. I remember my heart starting to race as my brain tried to figure out why the usual way to the bathroom was blocked, so I turned another direction and felt the wall that way, so I tried another direction and couldn't go that way either. I was terrified. I remember the darkness being overwhelming as I started groping around, feeling for anything that would give me a better frame of reference; then I felt a light. My little brother and I at the time had our own school desks with lights attached to them. We would use the lights each day, while working on our home-school activities. I realized that what I was feeling was one of those desk lights, so I switched it on. The

light made me squint, close my eyes, blink and blink and blink, until where I was came into better focus. I was standing in the corner of my room, the desk in front of me, the wall behind me, and a chair to my side. I couldn't figure out how I had gotten there, but I was so relieved that I finally could see the way from where I was to where I needed to be. The terror and confusion of being trapped in the dark has never left my memory.

In our second week of Advent, we continue to sit in anticipation, longing, and hope for the God of Israel to come to earth as a human being: Emmanuel, God is with us. We believe that our God became one of us to not only show the way but also provide the way through the brokenness and sin of our lives to true healing and restoration. Today, we continue to dare to imagine, to sacrifice in this moment *what is* for *what could be*. We take a risk today that we might be disappointed, that we might receive a vision or possibility from God and find ourselves dismayed at the prospect because to truly hope is to put ourselves out there when all other circumstances and factors would tell us that it is impossible. That is why we talked about daring to imagine possibilities last week because if we cannot imagine the impossible as possible, then we will struggle through the rest of the Advent season. I'm asking you again to allow that inner child in you to rise to the surface of your mind. Together this morning, we dare to imagine peace.

We enter the Hebrew scriptures in Malachi, a very different place than last week when we explored the words of Jeremiah. Last week, we imagined with the Jeremiah the possibilities of a future of restoration even as they are forced by enemy soldiers to march to the capital of the empire, Babylon. Scholars think that Malachi was most likely written after the exiles have returned to Jerusalem, rebuilt the walls, and rebuilt a functioning temple space to worship again. Our text today comes right after the people's accusation, "Where is the God of Justice?" This small community in Jerusalem is struggling to survive and wondering how God could have

called them back to their homeland from Babylon if they are only going to suffer and die. God responds in verse 1 of chapter 3 by telling them to “See!” Look, observe, notice, pay attention. How often have we wondered where God is in the midst of our situations, yet we haven’t always taken the time to slow down and look around? God is going to send a messenger to the people before his arrival. In the next few verses, the Lord warns the people that they will struggle to endure the coming of the messenger, for just as metal is heated to remove the dross and impurities, and clothes or garments are washed with soap to remove the stains and stench, so the coming of the messenger will do the same with the priests or religious leaders in the community. Some scholars believe that this prophetic message is realized in the book of Ezra when Ezra the priest reads the scroll of the law for the community. Luke also takes Malachi’s prophecy and uses it to describe the coming of John the Baptist, which is where we find ourselves in Luke 1.

If you don’t remember what has happened previously, Zechariah, a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem, is muted by God after Gabriel, the angel, tells him the impossible: that he will have a son. Because he does not believe it, Zechariah is not allowed to speak until it becomes reality. At least 9 months or more later, John is born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, and our verses are Zechariah’s response, his first words after that long time of silence. In his song, which is also called the *Benedictus*, Zechariah celebrates the fulfillment of God’s promises in sending a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord’s arrival in John. We must remember that even though Ezra had come and reestablished the priesthood in Jerusalem almost 400 years prior to this moment and even though the people had returned and rebuilt the city, there was still the general consensus among the people that they were stuck in exile, stuck in darkness and their sins. They were ruled by foreign empires for almost all of the 400 years that span the Old and New Testaments. When John the Baptist is born, the dawn is beginning to break in the horizon of

the Israelite imagination. According to Zechariah, John is the first of several signs that God has not abandoned Israel to darkness, but God has remembered the covenant that was established between them. God is showing mercy, rescuing the people by sending a savior, a descendant of the great King David. The light that is dawning and the savior that is coming will guide the people in the way of peace, showing the way to serve God authentically and faithfully.

Let's look back at the story that I started my message with. I was stuck in the corner of my room, in need of a way out of my predicament, so I finally was able to turn on a light to gain some perspective. This morning, we have heard three different comparisons for what the moment will be like when the Lord comes, when Jesus arrives. None of the comparisons comes without its difficulties or hard work. The first is how the presence of God will refine the people as metal is refined by heating it and removing the dross. Second, the presence of God will cleanse the people as soap cleanses clothes of stains and stench. Finally, the presence of God will be like a light in the darkness, showing the way to peace for those who have been sitting in darkness and death. The metal must be heated until it falls apart and melts, the clothes need to be scrubbed, wrung out, or soaked sometimes to remove the worst of stains, and the light can blind the eyes, leaving us unable to focus. Even when we stop squinting and our vision clears, what the light reveals sometimes is more difficult to cope with than is sitting in the dark. Somehow, though, Zechariah's song comes to be reality through the intersecting and explosive combination of God's empowering presence and human response.

We dare to imagine peace this morning: peace that includes every part of us, our hearts, minds, spirits, bodies, and relationships. Just as refining metal, washing clothes, and standing in the light require effort, commitment, and energy, so does walking in God's way of peace. Violence, coercion, manipulation, and abuse seem to be endemic to our broken condition as

people. Even Vivienne at 2 years old has learned that she can get our attention as her parents more easily by using physical force of some kind rather than calling our names, attempting to communicate, or taking our hand. What I mean is that alongside her loving actions of hugs and I miss you's also come the stark realities of longing expressed in . It is hard work to find nonviolent solutions to sometimes intractable problems, in which what seems most effective in the moment to us is force. Finding alternative ways of resolving conflict and getting our own way is difficult, creative, energy-absorbing work, quite similar to the work involved in melting precious metals to remove the impurities, washing clothes vigorously to remove the stains, or walking in the light of God's illuminating presence.

Sometimes, we need true light, the light of God's love and mercy to shine on our social conflicts and action so that we can begin to imagine what peace with our neighbor or peace between nations might look like. Sometimes, we need our hearts soaked in God's loving care before we find peace in our innermost being. Will you dare to imagine peace this morning, peace that extends from heart to heart in Hutterthal Mennonite Church to peace that heals wounds from violence, oppression, abuse, or neglect? Even when the darkness is most overwhelming and all-consuming, will we dare to imagine God's peace shining in us, through us, and around us?

*Closing Prayer:* Let us pray: God of hope and peace, we ask for your energy and vision that we could begin to imagine what peace in us, peace in our communities, peace in our nation, and peace in our world might look like. Give us strength to resist using violence or coercion, to resist using insults or hatred. Bless us with creative imaginations that draw us into the difficult work of making peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.