

All I Want for Christmas Is...

Advent 2020

Message #2 – “All I Want for Christmas Is...A Make-Over” (Peace)

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

December 6, 2020

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“Creeping needs.” Like many of you, Kristine and I have been doing some much-needed renovations to our home during this season of the pandemic. It started innocently enough – one of our appliances was starting to go bad. We had a good run with it – over 22 years, but it became clear that it needed to be replaced. So, as we began to shop for a new one, we encountered great deals if we bought multiple appliances at the same time. That led to realizing that we really needed to then replace the atrocious mint green laminate counter tops that were popular in the 1970s. And then, if we did that, then we’d have to paint the kitchen walls to freshen them up. And if we painted the kitchen, then we really needed to paint the living room, hallway and foyer. And if we’re painting, then the equally atrocious 1970s mint green tile floor would need to be replaced too.

You get the idea. Creeping needs. We change one thing and that makes the other things in the room—or the house—look dated and in need of a fresh new look.

Make-overs have a way of revealing *layers* of creeping needs.

Craving peace is like that too. We go searching for peace in a part of our lives—perhaps our work, or our marriage, or our relationship with our teenage son or daughter, or in our struggle with loneliness, or with all the fears related to COVID-19, or the racial tensions... or just everybody else’s issues that clash with ours....

Searching for peace is like “creeping needs” — you crave it in one area of your life only to realize that the need ripples into other areas of your life as well.

Today, I want to speak a word of peace into your life—a word that comes from the Christmas story in Luke, chapter 1—the backstory of Jesus’s birth and mission. It’s actually the story of the birth of another baby—a boy that we come to know as John the Baptist—a story of how God speaks a word of peace into two old people, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the people of Israel that they represent . . . as well as the creeping needs of an entire world. For many of us, this story is very familiar. For some of you, perhaps it’s the first time you’ve really heard it. For all of us, I invite you to listen to it with fresh ears. Listen for the message of peace. . .

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations

of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. **(Luke 1:5-7)**

Back in those days, the people of Israel believed that when you had a child you were uniquely blessed by God. But when you didn't have a child – well, you must have done something wrong to anger God. Elizabeth and Zechariah, it says here, were “*righteous before God, living blamelessly*”... so, it didn't make sense to them why God would not bless them with a child. Every day, every year that passed, their peace was missing.

But God had a different plan in mind. The story continues...

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. **(Luke 1:8-13)**

Many of us long to hear those words – “your prayer has been heard.”

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”

Can you imagine what Zechariah was thinking in this moment? How he might have been feeling? Can you imagine him wanting so desperately to believe the words he was hearing... and yet reluctant to open himself up to the possibility lest he move from disappointment again into despair?

Do you know that right now – someone in your neighborhood, a person that you work with or go to school with, perhaps even someone who watched this service online, or is reading it along as you are – do you know that someone right now has been desperate to believe that God has heard their prayer?

The angel says to Zechariah...

¹⁴ “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” **(Luke 1:14-17)**

As is often the case, God's plan for our lives is so much bigger than our plan for ourselves. God sees our creeping needs before we do.

¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. **(Luke 1:18-23)**

So, the story continues . . .

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." **(Luke 1:23-25)**

To complete this story (which is intertwined with the announcement to Mary and Joseph of Jesus' birth), we'll skip to later in Luke's first chapter, where we read:

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:57-75)

And in his prophetic song of praise, Zechariah says to his new baby boy...

*⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,*

*⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,*

*⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:75-79)*

When God answers prayers, it's not just about meeting our own individual wants or creeping needs. God is carrying out a plan that's bigger than us—and He's using us as His ambassadors of hope and peace to deliver that message.

Zechariah and Elizabeth got a make-over. And their make-over impacted an entire people. All of us today are still marveling over their story.

**When God does a make-over,
His gift of peace doesn't just stop with the original request.
God's peace penetrates, pervades, and persuades.**

It penetrates – through the darkest times, through the seasons when we feel barren, shining a light of hope and reminding us that there is no darkness that can hide the light of Christ's love.

It pervades – God's peace multiplies. It impacts us on its way to impacting others.

It persuades – When people see God's peace, they want it. When people see God's peace in us, it exposes their longing for that peace as well.

When I think of my creeping needs for peace, I'm reminded of the apostle Paul's words in Romans 5:1-8 . . .

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us . . . ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-5, 8)

God's response to our creeping needs is to give us peace through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. When we put our faith in Him, when we put our whole trust in His grace, that's when we find "*the peace that passes all understanding*" (**Philippians 4:7**).

Are you looking for peace? Is that what you're craving as the year 2020 comes to a close – as life seems out of focus, out of alignment with what you've been used to?

Then let me invite you to seek the peace that only God can give. For "*your prayer has been heard.*" !

Let me pray for us...

Holy God, thank You for creeping needs. They remind us of how much we really need You. For each of us, would You remind us of Your gift of peace... the peace that passes understanding that comes to us with Your presence in our lives? We trust You, Lord. And we love the fact that You hear our prayer. We love You, Lord. Amen.