

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Prepare for Peace

Luke 3:1-6

Sunday, December 4, 2022

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Today, we focus on the Christmas gift of peace. And our focus begins with a text about John the Baptist. Why John the Baptist? Well, John the Baptist came to prepare our hearts for Christ. I don't know if you have noticed, but our culture is in a rush to get to Christmas. The music is already playing and the decorations are already up, and they have been for a few weeks! But those of us who desire Christ know better. We know we must prepare ourselves for Christ, and this is what our text is all about.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

**‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.**

**5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.**

**The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.**

6 And all people will see God’s salvation.”

-Luke 3:1-6

There is a gift everyone wants under the tree this year. It is the most requested gift of all Christmas gifts. Just naming the gift makes us want it – The gift of PEACE. Just saying the words melts our hearts, doesn't it?

We live in time of great unrest, anxiety, fear, turmoil, and we want peace.

So we come to this time of year and we sing about peace, light the candle of peace, lift up the Prince of Peace, and read about the angels singing of peace. Then we remember that Jesus said, “My peace I given unto you.” We understand that peace is the fruit of the

Christian life. Yet, peace is something very few people find, especially during the holiday season.

The big question is, “Will we ever find peace?” The answer: it is really up to us. Even though Jesus wants to give us peace, few people receive it because they don't know how to get it. We have all seen the bumper sticker, “No Jesus, No Peace? Know Jesus and Know Peace.” This bumper sticker speaks the truth. Knowing Jesus will give you peace. But the sticker leaves out one important truth. What the bumper sticker doesn't tell you is, “Know Jesus, Know Peace, *if you do what Jesus wants you to do.*”

What is it Jesus wants us to do? Well this morning I'm going to tell you. This morning I'm going to tell you the biblical keys to finding peace in your life. These are the keys those who have peace use. These are the keys those who don't have peace, don't use. If you use these biblical keys I am about to give you, you will find peace in your life.

Prepare Ourselves for Christ

“Prepare the Way of the Lord.” Luke 3:4

If we want peace in our lives, we have to prepare for it; we have to make room for it.

There is a popular show now called “Hoarders.” It documents those who have a serious problem with throwing away anything. Their houses are health hazards with junk piled high to the ceiling. The live their lives climbing over boxes and old newspapers. In most cases, they need psychological help with their problem of hoarding.

I could have produced a show like this a long time ago. I recall visiting a lady in another church I served who desired a pastoral visit. When she opened her door I was overwhelmed by the amount of stuff she had piled in her house. She asked me to come in and I didn't know how! There was no clear path into the house! So, we climbed over boxes to get to a small area we could

stand, and she asked me to have a seat...on a box. We began to talk, and after a couple of minutes the box I was seated on collapsed and I fell on the floor. And she had the audacity to say, "I thought that box might not hold you!"

We laugh at hoarders. We are sometimes disturbed at hoarders. Perhaps we find them weird. Well, we may not hoard material things, but many of us hoard something just as bad - negative thoughts and habits. Many of us live our lives weighted down by many bad thoughts and bad habits that we refuse to throw away.

This is why many of us don't have peace. Our lives are cluttered with negativity. We want Christ to come and bring peace to our lives, and Christ is saying to many of us, "I couldn't find a place to dwell in your heart and mind if I tried!" The question we must ask ourselves is, "Is my heart and mind a welcomed place for Christ?"

This is why John the Baptist says, "Prepare the Way of the Lord." What do we think that means? It means make a clear path, clear out the junk that is taking free rent in our brain and heart. We must take a trip to a spiritual dumpster and throw the clutter away because it is taking away precious energy and time and stealing our peace.

How do you we do this? Listen close because the advice I am about to give you executive pay thousands of dollars to get from gurus. I'm giving them to you for free. Ready? Write down every thought and task that is in your mind. Write down all of them. Then divide this list into two groups: important/unimportant. Do what is important and throw out what is not. That is free!

Here is some more advice that is priceless. Ask yourself, "What is incomplete in my life?" The biggest contributor to a lack of peace for people is incompleteness - the estranged relationships that have not been healed, the dreaded task that has been put off and put off. Many people will not sleep well tonight because of the incomplete things in their life.

There is no time like the present, so here is my suggestion for you. Sometime today write down your first step in completing what is incomplete in your life. And Deep inside you know what it is. Just write down that first step and do it. That's it. "Call the doctor tomorrow morning."; "Have a heart to heart with my spouse tonight"; "Begin praying about my ministry"; "Read a chapter of the Bible tonight"; "Ask the Lord to come into my heart." Just write down the first step and do it. As the old saying goes, "The best way to get something done is to begin."

Here is a picture of an interesting man. His name is Mohamed El-Erian. "El-Erian shocked the financial world when he announced his resignation as CEO of PIMCO a few years ago. The 56-year-old CEO of the \$2 trillion investment firm decided to quit after his 10-year-old daughter presented him with a list of milestones in her life that he had missed.

"El-Erian said the wake-up call happened when he was arguing with his daughter about brushing her teeth and she left to fetch a piece of paper from her room. "It was a list that she had compiled of her important events and activities that I had missed due to work commitments," he wrote. The list contained 22 items, from her first day at school and first soccer match of the season to a parent-teacher meeting and a Halloween parade.

"I felt awful and got defensive: I had a good excuse for each missed event! Travel, important meetings, an urgent phone call, sudden to-do. "But it dawned on me that I was missing an infinitely more important point ... I was not making nearly enough time for her." El-Erian said wanting to spend more time with his family is a cliché but he decided that "his need to be a good father was greater than his desire to be a good investor" (sources: 9News, DailyMail).

El-Erian realized he has missed precious opportunities with his daughter. His relationship with his daughter was incomplete. He didn't want to miss any more. What opportunities will you miss if you wait until it is too late?

I recall a man coming to see me who was a bundle of nerves. He complained that he could not sleep. He had been to a bunch of doctors and specialists and nothing worked. After a series of questions, we uncovered his problem. A few years back he said something to an old business colleague he regretted. There was a big blow out and the relationship was severed. My advice to him was simple. I told him to call the guy, take him to lunch and apologize. That's what he did! He later told me that he never slept better than he did the night of his apology.

Repair Ourselves for Christ

"Make His Paths Straight" Luke 3:4

Some of us not only need to clear the path for peace: we must repair it.

Several years ago Brandy and I went on vacation to Hawaii. We went out exploring in our rental car. We came upon a big detour sign that said, "Road Broken,

Cannot Cross.” We got out of the car and noticed a sinkhole had developed and sucked about a 100 yard section of road right into the ground. We were glad there was a sign!

This is what Christ finds on the way to many of our hearts – A BIG SIGN THAT SAYS “BROKEN – CANNOT CROSS.” You want to know this biggest road block to the peace of Christ? Bitterness, resentment, and the unwillingness to forgive. Many of us are dying for peace, and we don’t know why we don’t have it.

For many of us the reason that we haven’t found peace is that we haven’t forgiven someone or we haven’t forgiven ourselves. Resentment blocks the movement of Christ in our lives. Christ wants to empower us to forgive but many of us refuse the power and suffer a lack of peace.

If you don’t have peace in your life and have tried everything, it may mean something is broken in your life that needs to be fixed. What is broken in your life?

I want you to remember something that will save your life from much pain, heartache, and unrest. When someone hurts you, insults you, or betrays you, remember this: **YOU HAVE THE ADVANTAGE. YOU HAVE THE CHOICE TO FORGIVE THE PERSON AND MOVE ON. THE PERSON WHO HURT YOU DOES NOT HAVE THAT CHOICE.**

Is there someone in your life you are estranged from? A relative, a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor? Maybe a dispute happened. Perhaps there was a disagreement. Words were exchanged and you have refused to talk with the person or the person has refused to talk with you.

Maybe it was something that happened last week or maybe it is something that happened ten years ago. Perhaps the anger and bitterness inside of you has eaten you up like acid. Maybe the sadness and loneliness of not having them in your life is like a weight that you carry around. Maybe there have been times you thought about reaching out and trying to make amends but you are afraid or too angry.

One phone call could make that difference. One sentence could set you free. One knock at the door could release the weight that has been on you for years.

Years ago, someone wrote to a letter to that grand lady of literature Ann Landers:

“Dear Ann Landers: This is for all those people holding senseless grudges against other family members. After my father died, I had a fight with my brother about Dad's estate. It escalated and resulted in no communication for several months. After hearing a sermon on letting go, I called my brother. He was shocked but pleased to hear from me. The next day, he sent roses. We rebuilt our relationship. Five months ago, my brother died in a freak kayaking accident. I am so grateful we were back on track. Please tell your readers, Ann, to just do it. Pick up the phone. You never know when it will be too late. **MISSING HIM IN CALIFORNIA DEAR CALIFORNIA**”

I don’t pretend to know your situation or how difficult it might be but I do know why Christ came to this earth. I do know why this time of year is so special. I do know why we sing carols and praises to our King. Because Christ has forgiven us. I do know that each week we pray “Forgive us our trespasses just as we forgive those who trespass against us.” I do know that refusing to forgive does more harm to us than it does the one we refuse to forgive. I do know that when I begin to think about how much the Prince of Peace has forgiven me, it is hard not to forgive others. I do know the weight that is lifted when we choose to forgive.

When someone hurts you, pray, “Lord, I will forgive and move on. I choose not to strike back. I will not live with a lack of peace like them. I pray for them and hope they find peace, but I will not be like them. I desire peace more than a few minutes of satisfaction.”

Believe It Shall Be Done!

“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 smooth; and all flesh SHALL see the salvation of God.” Luke 3:5-6

The word SHALL is powerful. It communicates certainty. When we prepare and repair these things will happen.

For some of you, finding peace is not a matter of preparing or repairing; it is a matter of believing. Doubt rules your thoughts and life, and doubt can be a thief to all that God wants to give you.

Ever tried to hear someone in a loud environment?

Perhaps you were on your cell phone in a loud restaurant and you could not hear the person on the other line? This is how doubt works. It is noise that drowns out the truth of God for you. This why James says in the first chapter, “Ask God in faith, never doubting, for anyone who doubts is like a wave of sea, driven and tossed by wind.”

We must Have FAITH that God will bring us peace! Hebrews says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, “Ask it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open unto you.” Later, Jesus tells us that if we have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed we can move mountains!

I know a lot of bad theology has been developed from these verses, but this does not negate the biblical truth that faith sets God in motion in our lives. Why? God will not force his will, love and peace on us. But when we have faith, we give God permission to work! FAITH IS THE KEY THAT WILL SET YOU FREE!

I want to show you a famous depiction of Christ. This is Jesus standing at the door of our hearts and knocking. Over the years many artists have depicted this picture. And there is always one common element in every depiction. Take a close look. There is no handle or lock on the outside. It can only open from the inside. This Christmas Christ is knocking on the door of your heart and wants to give you peace. Will you make room for him and by faith let him in? All you have to lose is unrest, confusion, and chaos. And what you have to gain is peace! Amen.