

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2024
Sermon: “Ambiguous Peace”
Scripture: Luke 3:1-6
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Luke 3:1-6

3 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 Trachonitis, 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.”

Sermon: Ambiguous Peace

Today’s Advent theme is “Peace,” a word so familiar yet so elusive. When I say “peace,” what do you imagine? Maybe it’s family members laughing together around a table, finally setting aside their differences. Maybe it’s a handshake between world leaders, putting an end to generations of conflict. Or maybe, for you, peace looks like a quiet sunrise, a steaming mug of coffee in hand, before the demands of the day descend.

We know how peace feels. We can almost taste it in these moments, yet defining it—much less achieving it—seems impossible. Peace is like a fleeting shadow, always just out of reach. Philosophers and theologians, kings and revolutionaries, have all tried to capture it, to build it, to force it into being. But here we are, still searching.

In the 5th century, St. Augustine wrestled with the idea of peace. He argued that it couldn’t exist without justice. In his *Just War Theory*, he even suggested that war could be necessary for peace, so long as it was waged for a just cause. Centuries before Augustine,

Confucius offered a different perspective: peace was about submission to authority, respect for hierarchy, and adherence to tradition. These two great thinkers might have agreed that peace is worth pursuing, but their methods couldn't have been more different.

And yet, neither strategy—fighting for justice or submitting to authority—has brought us lasting peace. Instead, wars rage on, families fracture, and nations divide. The peace we yearn for seems to slip further from our grasp.

I saw this firsthand in 2012, during one of the most profound and humbling experiences of my life. I was part of a “peacebuilding mission” to Syria, traveling with a group of Westerners who believed we could help. Our goal was to train members of the Free Syrian Army in nonviolent resistance, to show them ways to build capacity without taking up arms. It was an ambitious mission, fueled by idealism and good intentions.

When we arrived in southern Turkey, just across the Syrian border, reality hit us like a tidal wave. We visited a refugee camp where thousands of people were crammed together, displaced by the brutal conflict. Women clutched maimed children, their faces etched with grief and exhaustion. There were no men to be seen—only armed guards with machine guns standing at the gates, a stark reminder of the violence they had fled.

I will never forget the sound of that camp: the wails of children, the murmur of desperate prayers, the silence of hopelessness. It was the most terrifying, soul-shaking place I had ever been. All the theories and strategies we had brought with us suddenly felt hollow. How could we talk about nonviolent resistance to people who had lost everything? How could we preach peace to those who had buried their families?

That night, the leaders of our mission called an emergency meeting. We were shaken, humbled, and utterly unprepared. And in that moment, we repented—not just in words, but in action. We confessed the arrogance of believing we could “fix” the situation with our Western ideas. We acknowledged that we had come not to listen, but to impose. And we asked God to break down our pride and show us a better way.

God answered, not with a roadmap, but with clarity of purpose. We abandoned our original mission and turned our attention to the children—the orphans, the maimed, the lost. We began building schools in the camps, providing a place for these children to learn, to heal, and to hope. That was why I stayed in the Middle East: not to bring my own solutions, but to serve where God called me.

Looking back, I see that experience as a turning point—not just in my life, but in my understanding of peace. Peace isn't about strategies or plans. It's about surrender. It's about repentance. It's about turning away from our own ideas and aligning ourselves with God's will.

This is the same message we hear in today's Gospel reading. When John the Baptist stood in the wilderness, calling people to prepare the way for the Lord, he didn't offer them a political strategy or a philosophical treatise. He called them to repentance. "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth."

John wasn't talking about the physical landscape; he was talking about the human heart. The valleys of despair, the mountains of pride, the crooked paths of deceit, and the rough edges of anger—all these block our ability to hear God's voice and follow His path. Repentance isn't just about saying, "I'm sorry." It's about clearing the way for God to work in us. It's about preparing a straight path for the Prince of Peace to enter and reign. While "peace" is ambiguous to us, it's not to Him – and when we let go of our pride, our self-reliance, and our need to control, we find that peace isn't something we create—it's something we receive. It's a gift from God, born out of His grace and mercy. It's a peace that surpasses understanding, a peace that endures even in the midst of chaos.

This Advent season, as we prepare for the Prince of Peace, I invite you to reflect on your own heart. What valleys need to be filled in? What mountains need to be brought low? What crooked paths need to be straightened? What rough places need to be smoothed? Bring these to God in prayer. Ask Him to cleanse the places in your heart that block you from hearing His voice. Ask Him to show you the way of peace.

And as you receive His peace, remember that it is not just for you. Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ, we are called to prepare the way for others to encounter Him. This might mean building bridges where there are divides, offering forgiveness where there is hurt, or showing love where there is hate. It might mean letting go of your own plans and trusting God's wisdom, even when it doesn't make sense.

What began as a three-month "peacebuilding expedition" in Syria turned into three years, a husband, two children, and a profound awakening to the power of repentance. I learned that while we might feel compelled to control or steer peace in the philosophical or political direction we think is best, God's vision for peace goes far deeper than our blueprints and plans. Peace isn't easy. It isn't neat or predictable. But when we surrender to God—when we let go of our need for control, repent of our assumptions, and allow Him to lead—we discover a peace that not only transforms our hearts but radiates outward, touching the world around us.

So this Advent, let us prepare the way for the Prince of Peace. Let us clear the obstacles in our hearts, surrender to God's wisdom, and carry His peace into the world. And in doing so, may we glimpse the salvation of God, just as Isaiah promised so long ago.

Amen.