

Listen!

Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 1: 78-79

You are invited to listen.

Listen to the language of your wounds.
(*Prayer at Night* by Jim Cotter)

Please stop, please! Silence!
Listen to the beating of your heart
Listen to the blowing of the wind, the movement of the Spirit
Be silent and know that I am God
and listen to the cry of the voiceless
listen to the groaning of the hungry
Listen to the pain of the landless
Listen to the sigh of the oppressed and to the laughter of the children
(*Celebrating One World* -- CAFOD 1989)

How cruel people become when animated not by God's Spirit, but by
the spirit of getting ahead in the world
(Archbishop Oscar Romero)

The poor and needy ask for water, and there is none
their tongue is parched with thirst
I, Yahweh, will answer them
I ... will not abandon them (Isaiah 41: 17)

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
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: 78-79)

The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple,
Even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in:
Behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.
But who may abide the day of his coming?
And who shall stand when he appeareth?
For he is like a refiner's fire.... (Malachi 3: 1-2)

The book of Malachi rings down the curtain on the Old Testament, offering a vision of the mighty God coming suddenly into the Temple, appearing instantaneously and without warning. These words from Malachi foreshadow a theme picked up by the earliest Gospel Mark that opens with the appearance of John the Baptist as the messenger of the Most High. Then comes the appearance of Jesus himself.

The Gospels are filled with images of Jesus challenging the role of the Temple in Jewish life. He accuses the temple leaders of colluding with the civil powers to oppress the poor and keep the people in bondage to the selfish interests of the institutional religious structure. Jesus comes suddenly

to the Temple with words of judgment that the religion which develop in response to God's saving action in the lives of the Jewish people, this religion was no longer representing God for the people. Jesus turns his back on the Temple and prophecies that it will no longer stand "one stone upon the other". God is doing a new thing for all people.

This new thing is what we celebrate at Christmas. The words from Malachi remind us that God listens to our cries and knows our needs. Perhaps the challenge for all of us, and to all of us, in this season is to listen: listen to each other and listen for the plea of God that we live in peace.

What is this idea of peace? What is this vision that drives the whole ministry of Jesus? What would it mean for you to live in peace?

I am convinced that listening is the key to learning, to growing, to building community, and to making peace. What are some of the ways that you listen in your life? What will you do to listen more intentionally? To listen at a deeper level?

As you listen, what do you hear people saying to you? What do you hear God saying to Crossroads Church?

What is peace? I want to encourage us to think of peace not as contentment and not as the absence of external conflict. I want us to think of peace as not primarily the absence of internal conflict either. Peace is being in touch with ourselves, in community with others, and in communion with God. The community is where God's Spirit reveals itself – where peace is shaped, not as a "peaceful easy feeling," but in the sharing of human life, in listening to each other on the journey of faith. The presence of God in us will not often bring us that "peaceful easy feeling". It will bring us hope in the meaning of our lives and in peace as our guiding vision to the extent we listen to God still voice among us. But we can't be community in the Spirit without the participation of you and me as individuals. This means learning to listen to ourselves, to God's wisdom within us, and come to know our true selves, even just a little – listen for our purpose, listen for our calling even just one step at a time.

This is the biblical idea of peace as *Shalom*. This idea of peace is the promise of Christmas. To embrace and celebrate Christmas fully is to come to a deep trust in the reality of this community. This is what the New Testament calls *The Kingdom of God*.

On this Sunday in Advent, our theme is hope. Jesus is our reason for hope in the promise of peace, of *Shalom*. The presence of God that we know through Jesus leads us to hope, not in a peaceful easy feeling, but in peace as being in the community of people and God. The Christmas message calls us to enter and embrace the community of the Spirit. This is *Shalom*: peace, wholeness.

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not
so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

Grant that I may not so much seek

to be heard as to hear

not so much seek to find my voice

as to be open to another's
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in listening that we embrace community
It is in community that we find ourselves
It is in finding ourselves that we discover your presence
That has been within us and in the community all along
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.
(Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi with additional text in italics)

Christmas is about God being born in us -- us as Individuals and, even more, us as community. How does that happen? Birth happens when people say "yes". The following is from college commencement address by comedian Stephen Colbert. Whether you like his humor, what he has to tell us about the importance of saying "yes"

Now will saying 'yes' get you in trouble at times?
Will saying 'yes' lead you to doing some foolish things?
Yes, it will.
But don't be afraid to be a fool.
Remember, you cannot be both young and wise.
Young people who pretend to be wise to the ways of the world
are mostly just cynics.
Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it.
Because cynics don't learn anything
Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world
because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us.
Cynics always say no.
But saying 'yes' begins things.
Saying 'yes' is how things grow.
Saying 'yes' leads to knowledge.
'Yes' is for young people.
So for as long as you have the strength to, say 'yes'.
(Stephen Colbert to the 2006 graduating class of Knox College)

Listen to the words of a familiar carol:
How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessedness of heaven.
No ear may hear this coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

May the hope of "Yes" bring the assurance of peace now and always. Amen.