

Grace Episcopal Church
December 9, 2012
Sermon by Rev. Marsha Vollkommer
Sin and Shalom*
Luke 3:1-6

Many of you here have experienced Wednesday morning breakfast at the Victory Café. For those who have not, imagine a table stretched from the back wall almost to the front window, with 20 or 22 or 25 of our own seated in “cozy” togetherness on either side. We have just worshipped together, prayed together, learned of the life of the saint of the day, confessed our sins, received forgiveness and shared the Eucharist. Now – with the fortification of coffee – we are catching up, filling up, sharing grandbaby photos and pet antics, and experiencing the true meaning of fellowship. Occasionally (and particularly at the east end of the table) things can get a bit...shall we say “raunchy”? And one particular defense – with tongue planted firmly in cheek – is this: “I’ve just confessed my sins and been forgiven, for the second time this week! Now it’s time to start over again!”

Sin and forgiveness. Sin and salvation. Not, perhaps, the words we expect to encounter in either the hush or the exuberance of the Advent season. Yet this morning’s Gospel uses the “s” word – sin. It’s right there. John the Baptizer “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Even the canticle we read (which is known as the Song of Zechariah, Zechariah being the father of John) uses the word sin. Those verses are the words spoken by Zechariah at his son’s circumcision in the temple when he turns from an eloquent thanksgiving to the God who watches over Israel to an equally eloquent prophesy of God’s intention for John. “...for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.” Salvation...forgiveness...sins...

We don’t tend to dwell overlong on sin. Or at least we think we don’t. Sin somehow gets caught up with the notion of rule-breaking – and as people of God we root those rules in the Ten Commandments. We know from our own Confession that there are sins of commission and sins of omission – things done and things left undone. Most of us can at least conjure up a few when we kneel to carry our own sins to God for forgiveness. We know that falsehood, harm, and anything that disrupts the sincere love of all in God’s creation falls in the category of sin. All the thou shalt not’s and the I should haves? Sins.

How about a little ray of sunshine? There is another “s” word we should consider from biblical tradition, and that word is **shalom**. We have a tendency to think of shalom as “peace” – and indeed it is. But it is far more than an absence of war or a calm state of mind. As the Episcopal priest, Joseph Pagano, reminds us, shalom in the scriptures means universal flourishing. It means wholeness and harmony and delight. As we heard Gloria read from Luke, shalom is a time and place when 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 made smooth. Shalom is the time when flowers will bloom in the desert, when weeping will cease, when the lion will lay down with the lamb, when the foolish will be made wise and when the wise will be made humble, when humans will beat their swords into ploughshares. Pagano says shalom is the time when all nature will be fruitful and benign, all nations sit down together for a sumptuous feast, all creation will look to God, walk with God and delight in God. In the Bible, shalom is the way things are *supposed* to be.

And sin? Well, sin is the way things are **not** supposed to be, and we are confronted by those things every day. We hear about them, and read about them, and witness them...and sometimes we live them. We hear on the news that there is another murder-suicide. We hear of the imprisonment of yet another person by his or her own government, simply for speaking out for human rights. We read that a child dies every five seconds due to hunger-related causes on our planet. Or we read that the dispersants used in the cleanup of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill are causing more harm than good. The armed conflict between Israel and Palestine escalates, and the Congress of the United States votes down support of the International Disabilities Treaty, and we don't tell the cashier she missed a rather expensive item in our grocery cart, and we refuse to let go of a grudge against an old friend and continue to talk behind his back. The way things are **not** supposed to be.

I would suggest that sin is not only the opposite of shalom...it is the violation of shalom. We know that sin is an affront to God, and it is so because it breaks God's peace. God's peace is broken when the good things of creation are twisted so that they serve unworthy ends...when those things that belong together are split apart...when personal and social and natural integrity are corrupted.

Bummer!

And yet...and yet...when Gloria stood to read those words this morning about sin and repentance, she began by saying, “The Holy Gospel according to

Luke." When she concluded she said, "The gospel of the Lord." We didn't inwardly roll our eyes and say to ourselves, "not *another* lecture on sin." (Or maybe we did!) What we said aloud was "praise and thanks to you, Lord Christ." Gospel...Good News...there **is** Good News there. As a matter of fact there is Good News right there. It would be easy to say, okay, this is one of those times we can just endure, because, you know, Jesus Christ is about to ride in to the rescue. This is Advent, after all, and we are waiting, after all. To simply endure, however, is not the same as praising God for the Good News. Enduring is what we do when we take our car to an oil change and learn it needs five hundred dollars worth of work to make it "like new" again. A good outcome, maybe, but not necessarily good news.

John is proclaiming a message of the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In order for us to admit – which we recognize it over and over again – that something – many things – are not the way they should be, we are acknowledging an understanding of the way things **should** be. As Pagano says, we must have *some* sense of God's peace, in order to know when it is broken. We have been given the gift of a vision of God's peace in our scriptures, and in our religious traditions, and in our reflection on creation. We have been given a vision of the world as created and redeemed by our good and generous God, a world made to be fruitful, abundant, harmonious, life-giving, peaceful, whole, filled with deep and abiding joy. If we can hear John's message about sin, then we must already know about God's peace. That is Good News! (And maybe one of the things we might confess before God is how often we fail to focus on what fruitful, abundant, harmonious, life-giving, peaceful, whole and joyous lives we are blessed to live.)

Another way to look at John's message as truly Good News is to realize that he is not saying things aren't as they should be now...and never *will* be...so get used to it! Rather than being a message of futility, this is a message of liberation and joy. We are being called back – repent! – to aligning our own will and our collective wills with the will of God. We are being called to action...because knowing God's peace, we know that the hungry *can* be fed, that enemies *can* become friends, that the killing *can* truly cease, that families *can* be made whole. What Good News it is, indeed, that we have been invited to respond...to commit...to act...to embrace God's call to shalom.

And here's the big thing. Through John's message we are reminded that we already know God's peace, and we can respond to the call of God's peace...Does this not show that in some way we already trust in the eventual triumph of

God's peace? That, my friends, is Good News! Gloria told us last week that we are not waiting simply for the rewinding of the Jesus story to the birth of the babe in the manger. We are waiting for the coming again of the Risen Christ. We are waiting to celebrate the beginning, and we await the fulfillment. We are waiting for the triumph of shalom.

At Centering Prayer on Friday, a question was raised about the tone of Advent. Why does a time that seems to be infused with joyous anticipation feel almost sad? Linda responded to the question when she said, this not a sad, but a serious time. Not a somber, but a sober one, if you will. John the Baptist's charge was a serious and sober one. He was called to be "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." His message: "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Work to make things right – the way they should be – **participate** in God's peace. The waiting of Advent calls us to get to work to make all paths straight. We know, and we confess, that we are often right at the heart of things that aren't as they should be. But John's call to repentance reminds us that we not only know the Good News, we are being invited to full participation in the story. We are invited to repent and be forgiven, and then roll up our sleeves and start putting things to rights. We do this with the confidence that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And we do this in a spirit of gratitude, and joy, and trust because the eventual triumph of God's shalom has already been given us...in the birth of a baby long ago...in the life and death and resurrection of the Son of Man...and in the promise that the Prince of Peace will come again.

Shalom!

* With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, associate rector of St. Anne's Parish, Annapolis, Maryland for the inspiration.