

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

There is a voice in the wilderness crying “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, move all that junk out of his way!” It is the voice of the prophets, of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, of Ezekiel, of Elijah, and the voice of enigmatic John the Baptist. And it ought to be our voice, too. What a time to be prophets! When all the world seems focused on the Christmas theme, when all the shops are promoting gift-giving, when all the streets are lined with festive lights, when music with a Christmas message is everywhere, when special plans for family and friends and church are center-stage in the nation’s weekly planners. What a time to be a prophet, what an opportunity for us as the people of God to cry out in the wilderness, to speak to a broken world, to remind our families and friends, and our church, that Christ is indeed coming, that Christ is always coming, again and again, to be in our midst at each gathering, bringing gifts to those who invite him. We can be like John the Baptist.

Should you use this wonderful opportunity to call your friends and family a “brood of vipers”, a slithering pack of snakes? No, probably not. Notice, by the way, that John aims that particular judgment at the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of his time, the established church. For even the church is due for judgment, maybe especially the church. The Church, which in our Christian times might just forget that it is chosen to be the Body of Christ, the heir which has inherited the mission and message of Jesus, the organization which is supposed to represent God’s own intent to our culture, to be itself prophetic and spread the word that Christ is coming, that Christ is always coming, bearing gifts of hope and peace for those ready to receive them. And to receive them means to experience two things simultaneously. This is the enigma. Two things which seem incompatible; two things which are necessary to make the crooked ways straight, to make a highway in the desert. John calls it “the coming wrath”, but then in the same breath speaks of bearing good fruit. Those two things are judgment and salvation.

It might seem ironic, but judgment and salvation are twin sisters. In the Christian message, in Christ’s teaching, they come hand-in-hand into our lives. Judgment, the more contemplative of the twins, is always asking us to consider the unintended consequences of our behavior. Her message is not one of punishment or condemnation; she teaches us to own up to our errors, to feel their consequences subjectively, but also to study them objectively. To feel remorse, but to learn from them. To be ready and willing to improve our lives. At the same time, at the very same time, her twin sister, Salvation, the more cheerful of the two, is always asking us to humbly receive forgiveness, to accept her Christmas gift with grace and a smile, looking to the future, a future of new possibilities as the early morning sky continues to brighten with the promise of dawn. Both sisters are persistent, both are dedicated to their mission, and both arrive simultaneously in the Name of God.

Those twin sisters bear the prophet’s message. And with all this focus on Christmas, what better time, what better opportunity for us to bear that same message?! Advent is a time when God’s promises are in the air, when many around us might be asking “what is all this celebration about?” “Who knows how all this got started, anyway?!” “Why am I struggling with these Christmas lights, with this Christmas list, with the quiriness of my family?” Well, do we, as the people of God, as the Body of Christ, the representatives of Jesus himself, do we have an answer to the “Why” question?

Will we take the initiative to share that answer? Will we be like the prophets, and like John the Baptizer? It might seem that our answer ought simply to be “Peace on Earth”, but what does that really mean? It’s a good answer, I’m sure Jesus would approve, but what is that peace really like? Is it the complete absence of conflict? Is it sitting in the recliner and taking a welcome nap?

Think about our twin sisters, Judgment and Salvation. They go everywhere together, they are bound together by history and DNA. Most of the time, they are friends. But there is tension between them. Judgement is keenly aware of authenticity. To gain her attention, one must be true to oneself, to be able to make confession, to reflect on one’s comings and goings. When choosing her friends, she picks those who are faithful and true, dependable and sincere, reliable and transparent. Her sister, Salvation, is especially fond of forgiveness, and chooses her friends from among those who have the maturity to forgive both themselves and their neighbors. She isn’t silly enough to ignore their sins, but she knows in her heart that fresh, new relationships will only endure when we can look beyond offenses and offensiveness and find new paths into the future. If you think that there is always peace between the two sisters, that is, peace without tension, you would be mistaken. Even twins have moments of conflict, of conflicting interests. Salvation focuses on new possibilities, while Judgement focuses on the leftover consequences. There is bound to be tension there.

But as a piano tuner, let me tell you about tension. Without tension, there would be no piano music. Each piano has around 240 drawn wire strings, and, depending on the scale design, each of those strings is under about 180 pounds of tension. The whole instrument, the one sitting stately in your living room, is straining under nearly 40,000 pounds of tension, held precariously in place by its cast iron frame. If it were not for tension, your piano would make only clunks. It would be a “clunker”. But the tension must be tuned to produce a harmonious and peaceful sound, and a piano tuner uses specific tools to make those precise adjustments. The tension must be regarded, taken seriously, respected even. There is tension between repentance and bearing good fruit. There is tension between judgement and salvation. There is tension between giving and receiving. There is tension in loving your neighbor. There is tension in loving yourself. There is tension in the Christian life. But without it, there would be no clear tone, no possibility for harmonies of different tones heard at the same time, no enriching music.

God’s “peace” is the theme of today’s advent candle, it is what we pass to one another with a handshake or smile in this reverent place. But God’s peace is not peaceful, for God’s peace is not empty. It does not ignore struggle and sacrifice. God’s peace is devoted to tuning tension, and the tools we use are confession and forgiveness, authenticity and maturity, reflection and good cheer, prayer and action. Surely the days are coming when God’s PEACE will enfold us, and Jesus will welcome us enthusiastically. But there, in Christ’s loving embrace, there is not numb detachment, but rather the challenge of life. Christ is indeed the fulfilment of all God’s historic promises, but being the Body of Christ, as we have chosen to do by our baptisms and confirmations, should not lull us into a dreamland of elves and red-nosed reindeer (while those are certainly fun), but being the Body of Christ should call us to renew the mission and ministry of Jesus himself, to tune the tensions in our world, in our families, and in ourselves. So that as the sky brightens with orange and red and gold, as dawn approaches, and as Christ continues to be born again and again and continues to meet us on the road ahead, we may, like the dear twin sisters, make heavenly music for our King. Amen