BAPTISM OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 11, 2025

ISAIAH 42:1-9 | PSALM 29 | ACTS 10:34-43 | MATTHEW 3:13-17

The psalmist, St. Peter, and St. Matthew agree. It's all about peace.

The psalmist writes, "May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!" In today's reading from Acts, Peter claims that God has blessed his people with peace through the ministry of Jesus. Peter tells Cornelius and a group of gentiles, "You know the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ."

Peacemaking is at the heart of Jesus's life and work. And because our baptisms join us to Christ, peacemaking is at the heart of our vocation, too.

In fact, in our baptismal rite, we answer a series of questions about whether we will take on the responsibilities of discipleship. We focused on these during our midweek vespers last Lent. We are asked whether we intend "to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and—here's the key one—to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."

When we are asked these questions, I think it's the peacemaking one that intimidates us the most. Come to church? Absolutely. Receive the sacraments? We're already here. Proclaim the good news? Sure. Serve our neighbors? Great. Strive for peace in all the earth? Let's not get carried away here. Most days we are striving to get dinner on the table and handle our to-do list.

Peacemaking is something other people do. It's something diplomats do at the UN. It's something negotiators do in Saudia Arabia. It's something politicians do in Miami. That's not really my area.

But if we share in Jesus's baptism, if we are joined to his mission, if we are always growing into his pattern of life, then peacemaking can't be an optional extracurricular. It's at the heart of our calling and purpose.

Part of the reason we struggle with that call to peace is because we imagine peace as the absence of something. The absence of war, the absence of violence, the absence of armed conflict. And so we may look at the world and say, *Well, peace is good. But it's not something I can contribute to.*

But in scripture, especially in the Hebrew Bible, peace is a positive reality. Something that describes harmony, mutual dependence, and right relationship. When St. Peter declares that Christ has brought us peace, he's saying that Jesus has repaired our relationship with God. That where we used to live with fear or animosity toward God, we can now live in expectant trust.

And thanks to the gift of his Spirit, Jesus is now restoring harmony to our relationships with one another. It's not a coincidence that Peter makes this speech about the

peace of Jesus right before the baptism of Cornelius, a gentile he once thought should stay outside the household of God.

Peter reminds us what it means to live as a peacemaker. It doesn't just mean curtailing conflict, though that's certainly part of it. To share Christ's vocation as a peacemaker means that look for opportunities to join together, to create relationship, to strengthen trust.

Too often, we try to fix the world's problems in the third person rather than in the second person. Meaning, we talk about people rather than to them. We say "they" rather than "you." In the book of Acts, for example, there is lots of talk about gentiles. Whether non-Jews like *them* should be allowed into the church. What *those people* need to learn. What *they* need to do to follow Jesus.

We have *theys* of our own, of course. Sometimes *they* are the members of other churches, Catholics, evangelicals, and Missouri Synod Lutherans, in particular. Sometimes *they* are the people who go to the other service. *They* can be our neighbors with different ethnic backgrounds, gender expressions, and life experiences than our own. *They* can be people with different political beliefs, different values, different priorities, different cultures. You get the idea.

What makes Peter's speech so important is that it's here that he stops talking *about* people like Cornelius and starts talking *to* Cornelius. Cornelius is no longer a "him" but a "you." In that moment, Peter goes from being a problem solver to being a peace maker. And it's through that peacemaking, through that joining together, that the body of Christ is strengthened.

Not long ago, I was chatting with one of our parishioners who had it exactly right. They said that when they read or watched the news, they felt terribly depressed about the state of the world and—even worse—disempowered about their ability to do anything about it. So whenever they started to feel discouraged or nihilistic about the world, they would start small. If I feel like I can't bring peace to the world or my country, start closer to home. Where are the places that I can be a peacemaker in my neighborhood? In my school? In my church?

You do not need to be a diplomat or a negotiator or an elected official to do this work. All you need is the gift of Christ's Spirit and an invitation to join his mission. And through our baptisms, that's exactly what we have to offer the world.

We live in a world of so much violence, so much resentment, so much needless death. Thanks be to God that we are given a share of Christ's love to share with our neighbors near and far. Turning *theys* into *yous* and building a more vibrant *us*.

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