

## ***“... with Peaceful Wings Unfurled”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
on December 6, 2020 – Advent 2  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Text: Luke 1:67-79

We've had two roaring Nor'easters within the last week, complete with heavy rain, howling wind and even a bit of sleet and snow in yesterday's gale. Growing up in Pennsylvania where the first heavy snow often fell in October and summer storms would roll through the area full of sound and fury, I thought I knew what bad weather was like. I was wrong. Until you've lived on the coast of New England and been through a Nor'easter or two you have no clue what a storm is. As I write this message on Saturday evening, the storm sounds like a freight train roaring through my backyard. The rain mixed with ice and snow is pelting the windows and I am especially grateful that I am inside my warm and cozy house newly decorated for Christmas. But I am worried about all those folks without warm and cozy homes, curious about where they might be riding out this storm. Some are no doubt in the area homeless shelters but any street outreach worker will tell you there are people who will not go to a shelter under any circumstances. That's why I am sure some folks are holed up in their cars someplace out of sight where they won't get rousted by the police. Others might be trying to ride out the storm in tents anchored down as best as they can manage. Some might even try to find solace in a local Emergency Room, although it's unlikely that will work these days with Covid raging out of control. Clearly, then, there are folks enduring this storm this night who can scarcely imagine the peace and quiet of a warm and cozy home like you and I enjoy and take for granted much of the time.

Peace and quiet – even the words sound lovely and inviting, don't they? I am sure those two words conjure up all kinds of pictures in your mind as soon as I speak them. What are those pictures, those feelings, those longings you feel when you are asked, as I am asking you now, to imagine your favorite place to enjoy some peace and quiet? Is it your own home, curled up in front of a fire with a cup of cocoa and an old movie on TV? Is it a favorite, lonesome spot on a trail you love to hike or a beach you escape to late on a hot summer day? Where DO you find peace and quiet

and what do you do with it when you have it? Contrary to what you might think, these are important questions for all of us to consider in these crazy, anxious Covid days because carving out time and space for taking care of ourselves is a vital coping skill much needed at the moment. We all need peace and quiet, a time and a space for stepping back and away from all the stuff that makes us crazy on an average day. Not only do we need it, dear ones, we crave it. We crave a moment of peace when our minds are not racing, our hearts are not pounding, our bodies are not racing around to get just one more thing done. We forget all the time that, contrary to what we might think, God did not create us to be constantly busy, constantly on the move, constantly worried about what's going to go wrong next. That is not and never was the life God intended for us to live.

I wanted us to pause and think about this notion of what it means to live in peace as we consider the theme of peace for this second Sunday in Advent. Our tendency in Western civilizations is to think of peace very narrowly, as merely the absence of conflict or war. But the biblical concept of peace is much broader, much deeper, much more expansive than simply peace as the absence of conflict, the opposite of war. The biblical concept of peace is captured in the word *shalom*. The precise meaning of this word is difficult to pin down for our Western ears, but basically it refers to a wholistic notion of well-being that manifests as a sense of overall peace and contentment. It describes a state of being in which a person's physical needs are met, a person's emotional, mental and spiritual self is stable and happy. In other words, *shalom* means everything for everyone is as it should be. But, this never happens right? That's just not the way life is. Bad things happen to good people all the time. So what does *shalom* really mean then? I guess I think of it as aspirational – as what God wants for us and what we want for ourselves, impossibly illusive thought it may be.

But, here's the thing – does it have to be impossibly illusive? Does this *shalom*, this peace and quiet we all crave have to remain only aspirational or is it something we can actually attain? This very question is what our text from Luke's Gospel this morning is trying to get at. Even though this portion of Luke's first chapter is an integral part of the Christmas story we know and love, this particular section is one we seldom read or are even aware of. This text is about Mary's cousin Elizabeth whom

she goes to visit after the angel shares the news of the baby she is to bear. Elizabeth is herself pregnant although she had been barren. Miraculously she and her husband Zechariah managed to conceive and she gave birth to her son soon after Mary left to return to her home. Luke's Gospel actually begins with the story of Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy. Her husband Zechariah was a priest and it was Zechariah's turn to be at the sanctuary to offer incense while the people were praying. On this particular day Zechariah was doing his thing and an angel appeared to him to tell him about Elizabeth having a baby and that they were to name him John. The angel also goes on to tell him how much joy the child will bring them but he is to be dedicated to the Lord always as the one to get the people prepared for the savior to come. Zechariah was skeptical and said to the angel, "How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years." This did not go over well with the angel who responded that because Zechariah did not believe the angel's words, he would remain mute until the baby's birth. Gabriel in this story is clearly much less patient with Zechariah than he was with Mary. Hmmmm...

Fast forward nine months and Elizabeth gives birth. The custom at the time was for a male son to be named after his father so when Elizabeth told the officials at the synagogue where they came on the 8<sup>th</sup> day for the circumcision that the baby's name was John, they turned to Zechariah to see what he wanted. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet on which he wrote, "his name is John." At that moment Zechariah was able to speak again, and the text we read this morning is what Zechariah said. This is a beautiful, lyrical text in which Zechariah proclaims that God is to be praised for sending a savior to God's people because surely God's people are suffering and need to be rescued. He explains that God is doing this to fulfill the promises he made to Abraham and that this baby, his son John, would be the one to go before the savior to prepare the way for him. Zechariah then ends with one of the most beautiful verses in the bible when he says, "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 in the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79)

To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace. Dear ones, that surely sounds like a

prescription for what we need in our lives right at this moment, as Covid swirls around sickening more and more people every day, overwhelming hospitals and medical staff and scaring us all about what still lies ahead. It surely sounds like exactly the kind of peace we need in our minds and hearts as the democratic foundations of our beloved country are rocked by one person who refuses to accept the results of a legitimate election. Dear ones, we are enduring a period of darkness in our lives right now that is unlike anything any of us have been through before and the journey forward into the future remains shrouded in the darkness of fear and uncertainty. Never before have we needed like we do now the assurance that God's presence still enfolds and protects us, shining the light of hope to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Perhaps this is why this beautiful Christmas carol, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, has taken on new meaning for me this year. I never noticed before, and perhaps you never have either, that this is the one Christmas carol that is entirely about peace. It begins in verse 1 with the angels singing "Peace on earth, good will to men from heaven's all gracious King" and it builds on this powerful imagery from there. In verse two the angels continue to pour through the "cloven skies," the heavens parted, "with peaceful wings unfurled." What a powerful image that is! Angels literally pouring out of heaven, their wings carrying them everywhere around the world as peace rolls off their unfurling wings while they sing their joyous news to "all the weary world." Everywhere they fly their songs of peace and good will rain down upon the earth in all its misery, its loud chatter – its Babel sounds – drowned out by the angel voices. Verse three is pointedly directed at us --- you and me. "And ye, beneath's life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low" – doesn't that sound familiar? Doesn't that *feel* familiar? Dear ones, that means it is us who are encouraged to see in the angels "glad and golden hours" coming with them. And, if nothing else, we're told, "O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!" What a lovely and powerful invitation! And isn't that exactly what we need to be doing in these difficult and anxious days we are enduring? Verse four then reminds us that God's promised peace will, at the last, become real: "When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing."

How amazing are those lyrics? It's like they were written for us, right here and right now! But, they weren't, at least not technically. This beautiful carol was written as a poem in 1849 by a Unitarian pastor, Edmund Sears, from Wayland, MA. It was set to music at Sears' request to a tune called "Carol" written for it by in 1850 by Richard Storrs Willis. Sears wrote the poem during a melancholy time in his life when he was recovering from a breakdown and much distressed by the news of revolutions in Europe and the US war with Mexico going on at the same time. He was discouraged because he felt the world was just not hearing, just not understanding, the Good News of the Christ Child and he lamented all that the world was missing out on because of that lack of understanding. One man's melancholy is what gave rise to this magnificent hymn. What is truly remarkable about this Christmas carol is that it does not describe the nativity in Bethlehem even though we sing it so often at Christmas that we associate the angel imagery with the heavenly host present at the Christ Child's birth. What Sears was really writing about though, was the issue of war and peace – an issue of personal relevance for him at the time he wrote and still of vital importance to us in our own time as we are at war with Covid and ourselves. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It\\_Came\\_upon\\_the\\_Midnight\\_clear](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Came_upon_the_Midnight_clear))

Sears longed for the whole world to hear the angels' song heralding the peace of God so needed on earth and revealed in Christ's birth. Zechariah, John's father, realized as well that this message of God's peace, God's light shining through the darkness touching even those in the shadow of death, is what guides and empowers us to follow the way of peace. Dear Ones, it is God's peace the world needs in this moment in a way different from any which has come before. It is God's peace which is unlike the peace we mere mortals can envision that we crave. It is God's peace that will only come to be when we believe it's possible, when we believe that we can help to make God's peace our own and the world's. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," Jesus says in John's Gospel. "I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) Dear ones, let us resolve this day to receive this unimaginable peace Jesus offers to us, and let us promise to share it with everyone we know. What better way could there possibly be to celebrate Christmas than that. Amen.