

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
on December 5, 2021**

*Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6*

In the early days of the pandemic, Gary and I ordered a couple of jigsaw puzzles for entertainment during COVID hibernation. One was a collage of impressionist paintings. The other was a collage of headline newsmakers: actors, athletes, politicians. We lingered over these puzzles for many weeks. For one of these puzzles, we got down to the last open spot, one final piece was needed to complete the puzzle...nada, no more pieces in sight. This was a brand new puzzle. We looked under the table. We looked on the seats of the chairs around the table. We never found that final puzzle piece. We were never able to complete the puzzle.

Hold on to that story...I have one more to tell you. A parishioner sent me an article this week about the salt mine that lies 2,000 feet below Lake Erie. Ohio produces 5 million tons of rock salt every year, most of which is used to de-ice roads. A photographer was able to go down into the mine and take photos. In the article, he talks about the beauty of the long tunnels and the cavernous spaces. Here is the remarkable fact for today...the salt mine is the remains of an inland sea that dried up more than 400 million years ago. 400 million years and here we are now extracting salt...a sharp reminder that our lives are a short chapter in a much larger narrative – so much bigger than our individual selves and our daily concerns. Yet, our chapter, our piece of the puzzle will-be-needed to complete the meta-narrative of God's Kingdom on earth, billions of years in the making. How do we hold that tension of the insignificant and the consequential? In life's metanarrative, our chapter is so small, and yet, integral. Our actions will have an impact on what follows. In our everyday lives, our concerns feel weighty, and yet, can be trivial in

broader scope. At the same time, our actions might seem to be unimportant, and yet, will have a lasting impact. How do we hold the tension of the insignificant and the consequential?

Let's turn to Canticle 16, our response to Scripture this morning, which we read/sang between the lessons. This Canticle is *The Song of Zechariah*, a hymn in which Zechariah is celebrating the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Zechariah proclaims, "You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." Indeed, in the Gospel passage from Luke, which we just heard, John the Baptist, now a grown man, is wandering in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Let's look at the frame to this Canticle, the opening and closing verses. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free." "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in to the way of peace." John the Baptist is preparing our hearts for our Savior, who is Peace. Jesus comes to set us free from all the chains that bind us, to guide us into the way of peace, peace in our hearts and minds, the groundwork for peace on earth.

We are waiting for this Peace. The cares of this world are overwhelming: disease, addiction, marginalization, oppression, thirst for power at all costs. Our hearts are restless for Peace. Our restless hearts are seeking rest in God, which is precisely why Jesus comes into this world, to heal our broken relationship with God, to show us God's presence among us, to lead us to God's presence within us, to open ourselves to the peace, which resides in our soul. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and prolific author on spirituality, notes that the "...the presence of God is infinite, everywhere, always, and forever. You cannot *not* be in the presence of God. There's no other place to be. The only change is always on our side—God is present, but we're not

present to Presence” (*Daily Meditation*, Center for Action and Contemplation, November 12, 2021).

How do we hold the tension of the insignificant and the consequential? We live in the present, in the Presence of God. We keep reminding ourselves of the reason for Christ coming into this world. The Prince of Peace came to reconcile us to God, to open our hearts to the peace, which nurtures us through all of life – giving us strength to endure heartache, clarity in decision-making and perspective on the import of our actions. Seeking peace for our own souls is not selfish. Our peace overflows to our common life together, how we live with one another, which is the role we play in the metanarrative, the role we play in creating the Kingdom of God on earth. How often do we hear in our Advent and Christmas hymns, “Peace on earth, good will towards all?” The Kingdom of God is not about power and status, and accumulation of wealth. The goal of our faith is living in relationship with one another, rooted in love, justice and righteousness – relationship is the point of life.

The beauty of Advent – in which we can place ourselves all year long, waiting for Christ to come again – the beauty is the power of silence, the fullness experienced when waiting in silence, setting aside whatever the cares of the day, however trivial or significant, simply being present to God. Our faith will always nudge us to find the time for silence. Let’s find the time, even five minutes each day. My guess is once five-minutes-a-day becomes routine, we will want to find the time for more. We meet God in the silence. We find the peace within us in the silence. Silence is life giving. The theologian Frederick Buechner writes, “In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. You are aware of the beating of your heart. The

extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.” Amen.