

Sermon – Confident of This
Sunday, December 5, 2021
Scripture: Luke 1:68-79, Philippians 1:3-11
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Our first scripture reading is Luke 1:68-79. These are the words Zechariah spoke following the birth of John, Jesus' cousin. Zachariah was struck mute, unable to speak, by the news of Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy and his voice only returns in the naming of their newborn son "John," which means "God is gracious." Zachariah's song echoes Mary's song, giving thanks for John who will be the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for Christ's ministry, announcing the good news of a Gracious God who guides our feet into the way of peace. Listen now for God's word.

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for God has looked favorably on God's people and redeemed them.
9 God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,
10 as God spoke through the mouth of God's holy prophets from of old,
11 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
12 Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered God's holy covenant,
13 the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us
14 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear,
15 in holiness and righteousness before God all our days.
16 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare God's ways,
17 to give knowledge of salvation to God's people by the forgiveness of their sins.
18 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
19 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace." Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Philippians 1:3-11. A half century after Zachariah's prophecy regarding John, the Apostle Paul who is imprisoned for his faith prays with gratitude for those who share the gospel with him, confident that the gracious God who visited us in Christ to guide our feet into the way of peace will complete the good work begun. Hear now God's holy word.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Confident of This

Text: I am confident of this that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion... Philippians 1:6a

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we thank you for the confidence of Paul in your ability to guide our feet into the way of peace. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This week marks the eightieth anniversary of a day the United States of America was speechless. On December 7, 1941 our nation was drawn into World War II with an unexpected and surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Frances Fowler Allan wrote about that Sunday in "The Story of Westminster." *Westminster people had just come home from a Communion Service. They had partaken of the elements, listened to the minister's meditation on "The Cup of Blessing," and closed with singing, "O Love that Will Not Let Me Go." At home, their radios burst upon the communion peace with news of Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into World War II... One hundred and thirty-five Westminster members are on its honor roll of WWII, which hangs on the wall in the East Narthex. Westminster lost five young men in World War II.*

This morning I would like to share the story of another Presbyterian, a good friend of mine from Webster Groves Presbyterian Church, Lt. Commander Werner Bauer. He was Acting Chief Engineer on the ship *USS West Virginia*, which was hit by torpedoes right before 8:00 a.m. the morning of the seventh and although the ship eventually sank, it was later recovered and restored.

What Werner recalled about that day is there was not time to say much of anything and like so many who were speechless, he longed for some direction or guidance which might result in saving lives. Werner shared his decision to descent into the bowel of the ship to rescue those who were wounded, a choice he never regretted and a choice that sheds paradoxical light on *the way of peace*.

As we light the candle of peace on our Advent journey to the Christ Child, let us be confident about the meaning of peace for those of us who follow Christ.

First, when the gospel writer speaks of *guiding our feet into the way of peace*, this is not a reference to the charmed life. Peace, that sense of wholeness and well-being, that inner confidence of knowing who we are and to whom we belong, occurs amid danger and disappointment and unexpected torpedoes along the roads we travel.

The way of peace and the secret of faith, according to the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians is learning to be content in whatever our circumstances. Whether I have a lot or whether I have a little, in the best of times and the worst of times, I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

All is well with our souls, not because we have never known sorrow or disappointment. All is well with our souls because of the good news, which John, the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, proclaimed. *God is gracious* and this Gracious God joined us in our humanity, in the wonder and mystery of the Christ child, experiencing the sorrows as well as the joys of this life, and who then went on to conquer death by dying on a cross.

Second, Werner's experience on the *USS West Virginia* sheds light on *the journey into peace*. Where does this road begin and where will it take us? Werner's decision to descend into the bowel of the ship to rescue those who were wounded offers us a map of the way into peace. Not only was it the right thing to do, an act of compassion and mercy, it meant coming face to face with the wounded and broken in his midst. Werner's journey into the bowel of the ship is a metaphor for each of our personal journeys within...into the depth of our inner being, into the silent and broken places within our hearts.

John Philip Newell reflects on this journey into peace in his book *A New Harmony*. He writes: *knowing and naming brokenness is essential in the journey toward wholeness. We will not be well by denying the wrongs that we carry within us...Nor will we be well by downplaying them or projecting them onto others. The path to wholeness will take us not around such awareness but through it, confronting the depths of our brokenness before being able to move toward healing.*

Sue Monk Kidd, in her book *When the Heart Waits* suggests *religion today too often bypasses the importance of confronting our brokenness on the journey within. She visited a church where the preacher invited people with heartaches and problems to come down the aisle to the altar. "God will take care of what's bothering you right now," he promised, without a word about the desert that lies between our wounds and our healing, as if one arrives at wholeness in the mere time it takes to walk the length of a church aisle.*

My parents would be celebrating their 75th wedding anniversary this December 7th. They met at the end of World War II. My mom grew up in the Christian Reformed Church attending worship twice each Sunday. My father grew up rarely attending church. The first time my mom brought my dad to worship, the service ended with an *altar call* and my father who was moved, perhaps more by my mother than by the message, jumped out of his seat to begin the journey down the aisle to the altar. My mother grabbed his arm, sat him back in his seat, and said "Where do you think you're going?"

Walking an aisle can be a marvelous thing as long as we acknowledge that the aisle doesn't end at the altar but goes on winding through life. (Sue Monk Kidd) May God, who is gracious, guide our feet into the way of peace. And may we be confident of this: staying in touch with our brokenness is essential on that journey toward wholeness. Amen.