

Rideau Park United Church

**Sermon: Where Does Peace Begin? (Rev. Jim Baldwin)**

**Advent II, Sunday, December 7, 2025**

When I wrote down the title for this week's sermon, "Where does peace begin?" The first line of a hymn immediately came to mind, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

We're not going to sing it today, because we have sung it twice in the past month or so. But I would like us to reflect upon the words for a moment:

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me;  
let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.  
With God our Creator, children all are we.  
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.  
With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow:  
to take each moment, and live each moment in peace eternally.  
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Last week, I spoke about how hope can grow from a simple prayer that is spoken sincerely from the heart. Well, a similar thing happened in 1955 when Gill Jackson wrote the song "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

Jackson had come through a particularly difficult time in her life when all hope was lost. But when she was at her lowest, she experienced what she described as "a moment of eternal truth." She said, "I knew for the first time, unconditional love – which is God. You are totally loved, totally accepted - just the way you are. And in that moment, I knew that I was here for a purpose."

Shortly after, she wrote the hymn, "Let There Be Peace On Earth" and on one version of the sheet music, her husband explained how the song spread throughout the world:

"One summer evening in 1955, a group of 180 teenagers of all races and religions, meeting at a workshop in the California mountains, locked arms, formed a circle and sang a song of peace. They felt that singing the song, with its simple basic sentiment '*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me*' helped to create a climate for world peace and understanding.

When they came down from the mountain, these inspired young people brought the song with them and started sharing it. And, as though on wings, 'Let There Be Peace On Earth' began an amazing journey around the globe.

First it travelled with the young campers, back to their homes and schools, churches and clubs. Then the circle started to grow. Soon the song was being shared in all fifty states – at school graduations and PTA meetings, at Christmas and Easter gatherings, and as part of a celebration of Brotherhood Week. It was the theme song for Veteran's Day, Human Rights Day and United Nations Day.

4-H Clubs and the United Auto Workers began singing it. So did the American Legion, B'nai B'rith, the Kiwanis Clubs and the Congress of Racial Equity. It was taped, recorded, copied, printed in song books and spread by word of mouth. The song travelled overseas to Holland, England, France, Germany, Lebanon, South America, Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. It was covered by artists such as Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby and Vince Gill."

And then, in 2015 – 60 years after it was written, it became part of a Microsoft commercial. In the commercial, the song inspires peace between two rival companies as Microsoft employees sing the song with a children's choir in front of the Apple Store in New York City.

In an interview, Gill Jackson said that "the song is a simple reminder to **be** the change you want to see in the world."

In the Old Testament, peace primarily refers to a state of wholeness, health and welfare. It is the sum total of God's blessings which is contained in the word "Shalom" which means fulfillment, wholeness, harmony, security and well-being.

In the New Testament, peace is described as an *individual* virtue or state, it is a right relationship with God or Christ, it is a right relationship among people, it is a way to greet one another and it is the absence of war or chaos.

One could say that Gill Jackson wrote her song when she achieved an individual state of peace...through a right relationship with God. By opening herself up to God's love and grace, she created a message that inspired right relationships among people throughout the world, and the song has become a way to greet one another, to create harmony, and to pray for the end of war and chaos.

“Let there be peace on earth...and let it begin with me.”

On this peace Sunday we are reminded that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke proclaim Jesus as the one who brings peace on earth and guides us into the way of peace. His disciples are instructed to have peace among themselves, to form a community of peace, and to seek reconciliation whenever communal peace has been disturbed. They are sent on a mission to bring peace to the world...but each person has to hear and receive the message for themselves; suggesting that before we can bring peace to the world, we must have peace in ourselves.

The passage in our Gospel for today has the heading, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness and he has one word for how we can prepare for the coming of Christ. He says “Repent...for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

In order to understand the meaning of the word “repent” in the Bible, we have to look its definition in both Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew word “shuv” describes the physical action of turning away from negative thoughts and actions, and turning back to God, while the Greek “metanoia” describes an *internal change of mind*.

Together, they describe a fundamental change of mind that causes one to turn toward God, and results in new actions that lead to a transformed life.

It’s not just saying “I’m sorry.” It is a deep mental and heart-level shift that produces changed actions and behaviours. It is a holistic redirection of one’s entire being, from rebellion against God, to alignment with God’s will, and it results in the experience of a living faith that is defined by God’s grace.

I could end there...but I have only dealt with one verse of our Gospel reading and there are eleven more. To be honest...I would be quite happy to end there, because it’s hard to share a message of grace, with a reading that expresses some pretty harsh judgement...but there is hope - that this passage will end with a message of peace!

John was a pretty interesting character. We know that his mother was Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth and they were both pregnant at the same time. He is a few months older than Jesus, and Isaiah predicted that he would prepare the way for Christ’s coming.

We know that he was a pretty wild looking character with his clothes of camel hair and his diet of locusts and wild honey...and he was also known for stirring up the religious authorities of his day.

John did not sugar-coat his words. When he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptised, he called them a “brood of vipers” who were just trying to “flee from the coming wrath” of God. He told them that they couldn’t just depend on being *Descendants of Abraham* to remain in God’s good graces, and he warned them, that their lives needed to bear fruit worthy of repentance, because there was an ax ready to cut down the trees that did not bear good fruit and they would be thrown in the fire!

And just to be sure they got the message, he follows this with another image of God gathering wheat, but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire! That doesn’t sound very comforting, let alone peaceful!

But I had an “aha moment” while I was reading this passage and it has to do with John’s description of baptism. John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me...will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” As harsh as all this talk of fire sounds...this is still a message of grace. You see, in the Bible, baptism is a symbol of purification. In the Jewish faith, water was often used in rituals, to purify and make new...and fire was used in the same way.

When the Prophet Malachi predicted the coming of the Messiah, he said that he would be like a refiner’s fire. The refiner’s fire is used to melt down precious metals like gold or silver. The process causes the impurities to rise to the top, where they can be removed. So, the refiner’s fire does not consume the metal, but purifies it and makes it more valuable.

In the same way, when grain was processed in ancient times, it was thrown into the air with a winnowing fork. The wind would carry away the impurities...the chaff...allowing the grain to be gathered into the barn for safe-keeping, while the chaff was burned in a fire. Again, only the impurities were burned...while the valuable part, the purified grain was gathered in.

So, when John says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, he is making a reference to purification...to a new beginning...and to grace. This holy fire does not consume the believer, but takes away the impurities, so they may live in faith.

Where does peace begin? Peace begins from within. And from there it can grow and bring peace to our world.

The National Peace Academy refers to inner or personal peace as “the awareness of one’s authentic being - and living from and relating to others from that awareness.” It begins when we actively strive to establish a right relationship with ourselves...and it is pursued by living with integrity in our emotions, attitudes and actions. Those same values extend to social, political, institutional and ecological peace. It’s all about living in authentic, right relationships with our world and our planet.

As people of faith, all of those things apply, but peace begins when we establish a right relationship with ourselves and with God. The whole point of Advent is to remind us that Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, was sent into the world to show us the way. He came to show us God’s grace...”for God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world, through him.”

This was the message that inspired Gill Jackson to write her song, and it is a message that allows us to keep on singing...for we are loved unconditionally...we are forgiven for our mistakes...and we are always given another chance to start anew in God’s love and grace. Amen

### Land Acknowledgement

My friend, Fred Cattroll is a professional photographer. He is a member of the National Geographic Society of Canada, and his work is on display at the Museum of History. He is also Indigenous, so in addition to photographing Kings and Queens and the Dali Llama, he has been invited to photograph significant events in the history of the Indigenous people of Canada.

When the pope offered an apology to residential school survivors, Fred was in Rome to capture the event. This week, he was back in Rome, to witness and photograph the return of 62 significant cultural artifacts to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.

Addressing a news conference in Montreal, Cindy Woodhouse Nipinak, national Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said “Today is another important step, but it’s far from the end. It’s only the beginning and we won’t rest until all our artifacts are home.”

Ktisha Paul, a youth representative of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs also accompanied the artifacts on their journey. She said, “Now that we have taken these steps, and rescuing our ancestors from the Vatican, we are all looking forward to seeing our belongings feel the mountains, winds, the warmth of the sun and the cleansing energies of our lands and our waters”

My friend, Fred posted, on FB the first of the photographs he had taken on the journey. Then he said, “Sitting in my car in Ottawa, I’m only now starting to grasp what the past few weeks have truly meant. I watched a CBC News clip showing the artifacts coming off the plane, and to see the moment I had photographed — my lens there on the tarmac — made it all real. I realize now that I witnessed history this month.

I was overcome with tears, in the best way. Yes, injustices were done in the past — that truth stands. For three years I carried the weight of knowing what was coming. Now it’s over, and we move forward.”

Today as we light the Christ Candle, we acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional lands of the Algonquin, Anishinaabe people, and recommit ourselves to moving forward in the spirit of reconciliation and peace.