

Embracing Jesus, leads to Peace

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79;

Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Albert Atama lives in Aru, a territory in Ituri province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, bordering Uganda & South Sudan. The region has been affected by the Lords Resistance Army, LRA, that we occasionally hear about in the news. It moves between the porous borders of these three countries. Albert is the coordinator of peace & reconciliation activities in Aru. He supports young people to find paths away from violence. Here are his words in 2017.

I became a peacebuilder because my country & my home is a victim of armed groups, war and violence. A lot of people, displaced by conflict, came to Aru to look for peace. I saw how they were crying, afraid & that affected me. It made me want to support victims of conflict when armed groups attack.

I was working in the Church when fighting began in 2008. When the bishop and the other religious leaders decided to work for peace in the region, they chose me to be the leader of the peace programme. I have helped create 9 peace committees in Aru and Faradji territories. Their role is to stabilise the population, alert people when there are attacks by the LRA, and show them where to run to and how to protect themselves. They also help to resolve conflicts between community members and displaced persons – those who are refugees or are returning to their homes after fleeing conflict.

We also help to support young people in this region, including those who have escaped from the LRA. Those who have been in the bushes for a long time, have a lot of trauma. We provide counselling and work with the community to help them return to their homes and families. We then work with these young people to help them become peace actors – to help their community accept other returnees, and to encourage other young people not to join the LRA.

It is so important to work with these young people, because the LRA target them to become fighters in the bush. We want to give them entrepreneurial skills and opportunities so they are less likely to join the LRA. For a long time, young people have been ignored by the peace actors in their communities. We are training young people in mediation, reconciliation and human rights to help them take responsibility for the future, to become the next peace leaders.

Peacebuilding is important because no one can improve the situation on their own. Conflict and insecurity are enemies of the development of communities, families, and individuals. We must work together. I hope in the future that the communities, young people, and religious leaders I work with have the skills and information to be able to resolve conflict by themselves.

Today I am very proud because I have spent 9 years working for peace in my community. The skills I have gained from Conciliation Resources have been very important to me. When the community consults me to help resolve conflict, to advocate for change or to help build their capacity, I am playing an important part in helping my community to live in peace. There are many many stories like this from around the world about people working in all kinds of ways to create peace.

The traditional theme for the second Sunday of Advent is *peace*. We use all kinds of words and descriptions to describe peace, explain it and as a goal to work toward. Some include harmony, “cessation of conflict, I found myself, truth and reconciliation, restoration, justice, the problem moved away or is in jail, not harming and even more – loving others, wholeness shalom, or even “God’s all-encompassing embrace.” The word peace is a word rich with many meanings and involves all kinds of situations from within ourselves, with others, between countries, races and the absence of conflict, violence and wars.

Biblically peace means all this and more. But most of all, it means embracing our Creator and allowing the Almighty to embrace us. **Zechariah's** song in Luke 1 describes this divine embrace this way: "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 into the way of peace" (v. 78). This comes from "the horn, meaning the king of salvation for us." (v.69) How does the hoped-for shalom described here connect with longings within our congregation and our community?

Our text from the prophet **Malachi** 3 reminds us that God's embrace requires repentance, a turning from our ways of harm and a turning to the God whose way is love. That way we can bring offerings in righteousness that are accepted by Yahweh, as Abel did.

Luke 3 continues this theme, describing John the Baptist's message of "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" and his call to make paths straight, to fill valleys, to bring down mountains, to make the crooked straight & the rough places smooth. When we turn from our ways of harm, we realize this promise: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6). What are some ways of harm present in our congregation that need repentance before we can experience the full embrace of God?

Philippians 1 is brimming with "embrace" imagery. There's Paul's love for the Philippians and their love for him. There's the reference to Jesus' compassion. And then there's the prayer for a love that overflows with wisdom & leads to righteousness. How is "Jesus' compassion" evident among us? How can we celebrate and pray this kind of peace for our congregation?

I have great appreciation and respect for all the people around the world working for peace. From endless meetings trying to get armed groups to stop fighting; to social workers and counselors encouraging people to make better life-giving choices; to groups demonstrating

for some cause like every child matters; or working to increase awareness of disproportionate violence experienced by Indigenous Canadian and Native American women; or conflict mediation; or supporting refugees and displaced people; or development workers helping people earn a better living; or people risking their lives as they encourage peace; or the young man in the story that began this sermon. The list is endless. All of these people and their efforts need our prayers.

But to have real peace, people need to embrace Jesus. That's why Christmas and peace are so closely tied together. We are given verses like, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, & on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

"This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best & may be pure & blameless for the day of Christ."

"Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Even though Jesus doesn't use the word peace a lot, everything he teaches is tied to peace in some way. At its core, its heart, it involves accepting the embrace of our Creator and in turn embracing Jesus His Son. It's that simple.

The phrase I hear a lot about situations, "It's complex," always irritates me. I always ask, "Who made it complicated?" The answer of course is, "We did." Many of the situations that need peace are like an onion skin, that has layers and need to be taken apart lay by layer so that the truth emerges, apologies made, forgiveness asked for and accepted, justice can be initiated, and healing takes place. This takes work and it is complicated. All we have to do is reflect on the Palestinian and Israeli conflict as well as the Shia, Sunni and other Muslim

groups. But I believe, when the people in conflicts fully embrace Jesus, I think this uncomplicates relationships.

Sounds simple. Maybe too simple. But we know unless disagreements are not quickly resolved – they percolate and get complicated like a virus. Layers get added on to the original conflict until the relationship and history is a mess. The response to “It’s complex,” is – “We make it complicated by not quickly dealing with the original issue and not repenting.”

A recent psychology study tells us we tend to overlook simple solutions. Too often we add factors to solutions instead of subtracting – simplifying. We too often add complexity. (17 April 2021 New Scientist, page 19) Just think of our personal computers. Companies seem to be paying people to make it more difficult for us to use them – instead of making them easier or simplifying the same processes.

In our scripture texts today, they say we are to embrace Jesus’ peace, repentance, and love. I think it is undeniable that all caring people want peace in this world, and in wanting peace they want more than just the absence of war, they want true peace. Peace that has in it justice. Peace that has in it a sharing of the world’s resources. Peace that cares for the good of the earth. Peace that has in it love, and joy, and hope. This can be summarized in the idea of shalom, wholeness as the Bible describes. It’s like what the people of Israel hoped for as they hoped for the promised Messiah. But this kind of peace needs God’s form of repentance.

Let’s look at repentance. **First**, simply put, it’s recognizing that we are going in the wrong direction in our choices, attitudes, and habits. **It’s admitting we are lost.** It’s needing to agree with my wife that I am lost, that I am wrong, & she knows the way to go as we drive.

The second step of repentance is turning around. It’s changing to go in the right direction. It’s stopping some bad attitudes, habits, choices and may even involve giving up

some relationships to surround ourselves with people who help us admit we are lost and help us cultivate life giving practices. This is why being involved in church is so important.

A town in Labrador, called Wabush, was, for many years, cut off from the rest of the world. Finally, a road was built. So to leave Wabush, you have to change direction.

To repent, we must change direction. All the thinking, wishing, praying, resolving, peace treaties in the world, will not create repentance. We actually have to turn around and go down Jesus’ road. Repentance is more than a feeling. It is confession, along with stopping, turning around and going in a new direction in life. When we confess and act; when we decide to go in the way God calls us to go and then do it; then God takes care of the rest.

Our Creator so badly wants us to embrace Him, that he has prepared the road for us and leads us to himself. John the Baptist’s message of preparing a way for the Lord in the wilderness often is interpreted that we must do the work. And there is good rational for that. Yes, we need to choose to go through the narrow gate. Yes, we have to repent. Yes, we must make some hard changes like becoming humble. And it is essential we believe in God’s Son.

At the same time, I believe, and the Bible tells us, our Savior so badly wants to embrace us, that He makes level every hill and mountain. The way is prepared for us. The Almighty so badly wants us to embrace Him that he tells us to really repent so that we can find our way out of whatever wilderness we face in life and move towards having the peace that passes understanding. This just does not fit our quid pro quo, our deal making, trading education, trade off, exchange, tit for tat worldly thinking.

This is so simple. But we so often don’t admit that we are at fault. We way to often spend our energy blaming others and trying to come up with logic to defend ourselves. I can’t help it but say, vaccines save our lives. This covid

issue is a simple example of how emotionally, factually, stubbornly, and spiritually we get so lost and so stuck in the wilderness. That's why Jesus came in grace and truth, to level the road, to make the road straight and smooth.

With John the Baptist's urging and warnings we so often miss that it is a word of grace. Of love. The transformation in our lives, and the ongoing transforming work, comes from our selves but it's really the power of God in us. It's something God does for us as we walk the road set before us so we live in peace and take on the habits, attitudes and choices for peace.

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But we are so stubborn, which makes repentance is so hard which is why the Bible and the Advent scriptures stress it. It involves acknowledging that we have been our own god, or that other gods, other powers, have been controlling our lives. Repentance requires, giving up those other gods, and submitting to the Lordship of Christ Jesus. It involves embracing Him. This is so simple, but it's so hard for us. That's why we need to work at leveling the road of our thoughts, attitudes, histories and habits. But also our Creator actually does most of the work. He helps us change from our road to His road. Repentance is asking the Almighty to take over our lives, inviting Him to set our agenda and we follow.

John and the Bible asks us is to confess our need for God, to acknowledge there are areas in our lives where we are on the wrong road. It may involve turning to God again and to walk on the road he sets before us. It's being obedient. It's immersing ourselves in the Creator's ways and values and will. Today we call this embracing the Almighty God.

So to have peace, we need to embrace Jesus and repent. This allows God's love to abound even more. Because the Almighty went out of his way to offer us salvation through his Son Jesus. As we give up our rights, our freedoms, to walk down God's road, peace starts taking hold of each one of us. It begins with us – if we listen and then act. When we take in the love that is offered to us, and follow it, then peace starts running our lives.

If we look for peace, if we try to build peace and prepare the way of the Lord, by setting in action large social movements, and lending support to great causes, without first seeking the wisdom and love of God, and the insight into our own lives that we need that asks us to repent, peace as only Yahweh gives, does not occur. We all need to work for peace, but let's do it with God's guidance and in His ways. Real peace starts with the verses from the Bible we are looking at today. Embracing Jesus. Allow Jesus to embrace us. Repentance. And then the Kingdom of God comes.

This is the only way we can successfully receive our Messiah – the Christmas Child. And it is the only way that the world can be readied for him and for peace.

And so it is my prayer, with Paul, that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ's coming - filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.

So, let's dare to challenge ourselves and others to imagine God's embrace. This widens our hearts to do the things in Jesus' way that make for peace.