

Peace
Nov. 27, 2022
Montavilla United Methodist Church
Rev. Heather Riggs

Luke 19:1-10

¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Happy Church New Year!

Today is the first day of the Church year, which begins with the first Sunday in Advent. While secular American culture is busy talking about Thanksgiving, the Church Year is beginning to talk about Christmas.

Advent is actually a verb. To advent is to begin, or to start happening. Like, the 20th century experienced the advent of television.

The church year begins, or advents, with the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. After Christmas we travel through Jesus' short ministry on earth. Lent and Easter have a major plot shift with Jesus' death and resurrection. The church year continues into ordinary time with the stories of the early church and more stories of Jesus, then 4 Sundays before Christmas, Advent begins again.

The purpose of the Church Year, and of Advent is to revisit the story of the people called Christian. We revisit the Christmas story every year to teach it to the next generation and to people of any generation who haven't heard it before. We revisit the story, to ground ourselves in who Jesus really was and what he really taught. We

revisit the story, because it reminds us of who we really are. No matter what other labels we may carry, in this story, in God's story, we are All Beloved Children of God.

The story of the advent of Jesus into the world begins in a particular time and place: First Century Judea. The Roman Empire stretched from the Province of Britannia in the Northwest, down through northern Africa in the South. From Syria in the East to Spain in the West. <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/index.html> First Century Rome was a large, culturally diverse, religiously diverse, and linguistically diverse country, not unlike the United States today. Roman justice was relatively fair, if you were a citizen of Rome, and there was a path to citizenship for people of all backgrounds. The Roman government also provided a lot of public good for the money they received in taxes. Rome built the majority of the highway system that is still in use in Europe today. Rome built aqueducts to provide clean drinking water and deal with waste. Rome built public baths, theaters, and coliseums to improve the quality of people's lives. The Roman government organized fire brigades, and did amazing record keeping so that they knew how much grain they needed to trade for to keep the population in the large cities fed, and we know all this because they paid historians to write it all down! Rome was both the best government Israel had ever had and the worst.

Rome was also brutal. If you were not a citizen of Rome you were not entitled to justice under Roman law. A Roman Legionary could conscript any non-citizen Roman to carry their pack through the city. The Roman army was constantly seeking to conquer their neighbors and conquered peoples were frequently sold into slavery. But there were 3 main issues that made the Jewish people living in Judea deeply unhappy.

1. Taxes. Roman tax collectors were not paid to collect the taxes, instead they kept whatever they were able to collect above what they were required to send to Rome. Tax collectors also used local soldiers to help them collect, so it was pretty much, pay up or die. On top of the Roman taxes and extortion, The "Temple tax," the tradition of giving a 10th of all the harvest to the temple to support the Levites and the poor, was also still practiced. So Jewish people felt like they were double taxed.
2. Emperor worship. Under the Roman Empire, the emperor was declared a god and all people were required to worship the Emperor. You were allowed to worship other gods, but everyone had to make sacrifices to the Emperor at the local Imperial temple. Which was a problem because the First Commandment is, ²"I am the Lord your God...; ³you shall have no other gods before me," (Ex 20:1-

- 6). Failing to worship the Emperor was basically treason, in First Century Rome. While worshipping the Emperor was violating the first commandment for Jews.
3. The third issue was diversity. Gauls, whom we now call French, who had retired from the Roman military had settled on the other side of the Sea of Galilee and they kept herds of pigs, which was unclean according to Leviticus. Greek speaking people from modern day Turkey, had moved in during the occupation of Alexander the Great, and international trade brought imported goods and imported ideas from as far away as China and India into the midst of the very parochial and somewhat insular Jewish culture.

Essentially the people of Judea were being double taxed, and extorted by Roman tax collectors, they were stuck between being executed for treason for not worshipping the Emperor or violating the first commandment if they did

And, immigration had brought a bunch of people who didn't speak their language, share their religion or eat the same foods into their neighborhoods, and while Leviticus 19:34 clearly states, "You must treat the foreigner living among you as native-born and love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." [Berean Standard Bible](#) The change between living in a place where there's basically one dominant culture and a few immigrants, to hearing languages you don't speak on the streets of your hometown every day, is a big adjustment.

The issues of taxation, religious issues, and diversity, were experienced amidst the other issues of a justice system that provided justice to some, but not to all, and an economic system where people were generally either very rich or very, very poor.

Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it?

Unsurprisingly, people in First Century Judea reacted in ways that we see today.

1. Some people accepted the way things were and did whatever they felt they had to do to make money and stay on the Roman's good side.
2. Some people rebelled. There were Jewish rebels who staged protests against the Roman occupation and mugged tax collectors and other rich people on the roads.
3. Other people were praying and waiting for God to do something.

That sounds familiar too, doesn't it?

Accepting that the world is corrupt and just going along with it, is a practical choice, but isn't a good option because then we end up participating in other people's oppression

and crushing our own souls. Joining a militia just leads to violence, which once again does harm, so that's no good. And we all know that thoughts and prayers don't stop bad things from happening.

So what do we do?

I believe that God calls us to work for peace.

Peace being the wholeness and healing of the concept of Shalom. A peace that is not just the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, community, and healing.

I also believe that our work begins with prayer.

It is good and right to pray for peace.

It is good and right to cry out to God for Shalom - to cry out for justice, for an end to violence, and for healing.

Because when we pray we invite God to change us.

We invite Spirit to inhabit our soul.

We invite God to challenge us to participate in creating peace.

The more we pray, the more we open ourselves to God.

The more we open up to God, the more uncomfortable we will become with accepting things the way they are.

The more uncomfortable we become, the more willing we are to work for peace.

As we work and pray and listen, we become more compassionate for those who participating in systems of harm, because we come to realize that all of us, all of us, are deeply caught within the systems of Empire.

We are all collaborators with injustice and oppression because we all participate in unjust and exploitative economic systems, and a country that was founded on colonized land and built with slave labor. The more we pray, the more we realize that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," as the author of Romans 3:23 wrote. So we realize that the people on the other side of issues aren't our enemies, they are just need God.

So prayer should move us to action. Prayer should encourage us to ask, "how can I do less harm and do more good?" Because a Shalom understanding of peace leads us to asking how can I act with peace towards my neighbor?

As Methodists we call this kind of Shalom seeking, holiness, and we talk about it two ways:

1. Personal holiness is our own personal practices of prayer and personal justice. So personal holiness may look like praying and then treating others with kindness. Personal holiness is how we practice Shalom in our personal lives.
2. Social holiness is our collective practice of social justice. Many of the Hebrew prophets were sent to remind the Kings and Priests that the purpose of the government and the Temple, and the taxes they collected, was to care for those in need. For example, the prophet Amos, in chapter 4, criticized the court of King Jeroboam of Israel as “fat cows” who oppressed the poor and crushed the needy.

Social holiness is how we practice Shalom/Peace in our public lives. So social holiness may look like voting, shopping with justice in mind, or giving money to causes that benefit the poor or oppressed. It may look like the way we hold our elected officials accountable to represent our values, and the way we peacefully challenge unjust laws, until we can make our laws more just.

Peace and justice isn't either personal or social, it's both/and. Methodists are both/and people! A Shalom life is made up of both personal and social holiness, and grace. Because that's what Jesus did.

Jesus criticized the rich who oppressed the poor, whether they were Roman or Jewish, but he didn't reject them. Jesus challenged them to do better. Which brings us to Zacchaeus, who isn't usually a part of the Advent story, but Zacchaeus rather embodies the conflicted and compromised life of the average First Century person. Zacchaeus was a Jewish tax collector, so some people respected Zacchaeus for his ability to make money and get along with the Romans and others hated him for collaborating with the Romans and profiting off others' suffering. Zacchaeus was attracted to Jesus' message. He knew that he needed to do better, but he didn't know how and he felt rejected by his community. So Zacchaeus climbed the tree so that he could see Jesus for himself, from a safe distance. But Jesus always looks past what's on the outside and sees our hearts. Jesus knew that Zacchaeus wanted to do better, he just didn't know how to reconnect with his community. When Jesus went to Zacchaeus house, it was like an endorsement. Like Zacchaeus is now “Jesus approved,” and welcomed back into the community of believers. Being welcomed inspired Zacchaeus to give away his ill gotten wealth, in a way that harsh words never could.

We are all like Zacchaeus. We're participating in a system run by a huge Empire and we're too little to see our way out of it, even though we are praying for peace.

But God loves us.

God just loves us.

God loves us even when we feel like everything we're doing is wrong.

So pray for peace.

God is still inviting us to come down and join the beloved community.

Where we can practice peace towards others, and find peace for ourselves.