

GOD SURPRISES - AND YOU, MY CHILD, A PROPHET

Advent

Luke 1:76-79

A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
With members **Kathy Williams** and **Becca McMullen**
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

After the birth of his son John, Zechariah breaks into song. He sings his praise for his son who will become known as John the Baptist. John will prepare the way for Jesus, call upon all who will listen to turn their lives around from ways of injustice and hate, to guide their feet in the ways of peace.

As we seek to respond to your word and will and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's Scripture from Luke 1:76 to 79.

Luke 1:76-79¹

“...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare God’s ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
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 ways of peace.”

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

If you have big things going on in your life right now, if you have important things – sometimes overwhelming things – going on in your life right now, Advent is so your season, because of everything in us that says, "Oh, I am so not a peace!" As Evan lights the candle of peace and everything in the season that shows us how afraid and terrified we are; we hear those same angels singing "Be not afraid."

It's a big season of change and anticipated change in my life and I have said kerfuffle 18 times a day. How are you Peter? I'm in a kerfuffle. If it's a kerfuffling time in your life as well, will you join me in prayer.

God,
In this season of Advent
Here we are in all that we are,

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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Needing to hear your Word of Peace and Be Not Afraid
that reminder that You *are* with us.
So God guide our feet
Even in this day and in this very hour
So that we might walk forward more in the way of peace,
In the one we call the Prince of Peace.
In Christ's name.
-- Amen

So it was 2 1/2 months ago now already that I sent out a letter to this congregation letting you all know that at the end of this year I was going to be setting sail into some new unknown adventure in my life. It was shortly after that letter came out that I met with a member of our congregation for coffee. We had a nice coffee. At the end of the time she turned to me and said, "Peter, sounds like you want to spend the rest of this fall figuring out what you're do next year." A part of me said, "Yes! Of course! What the heck *am* I going to be doing this next year?" And she said, "Well. Let me just offer something else, in fact. What if instead of worrying about what you're going to do in January, if you were just present with us."

I must've looked appalled at the idea, wanting to do anything except be present here this fall in this time. And so she went on she said, "Peter, no, I'm serious. What if you were just present here this fall? I mean, have a good goodbye. I mean walk through this journey of your own grief and letting go. And you know, that's going to be your best preparation and ours for whatever comes in this new year. And then in January, you'll know – or you won't know – what you need to do." I said to her, "Sharon, that sounds exactly like the Gospel to me." – And I always know it's a Gospel word when my first reaction is, "I don't want it," and my second reaction is "I don't like it," and my third reaction is, "Darn! That is so true. It's so true." And that conversation, at the very beginning of this fall season, has really set me on a path in a way to which I'm very grateful. And I found that, indeed, everything and that God is right here in this time.

It was the presence of the birth of his son John that set Zechariah singing, singing about this child who he knew was going to prepare the way for this one who comes that we will call Jesus. It is going to be John that is necessary for Jesus to come. John the one who tells people to turn your life around, be prepared for turning your life around, and walk more fully in the way of justice and peace. Jesus's ministry dependent upon John's ministry. And so in times like this – kerfuffling times like this – more than ever we need each other.

One of the great joys that I've had over these past decades is inviting people to preach with me and I am so grateful to Kathy Williams and to Becca McMullen who share a story about who in their lives – a father, a daughter – who has taught them and teaches them what it means to walk in this way of peace – Christ's way of peace – however we come on this day.

Kathy Williams, UCUC member

It was on the island of Guam in the Pacific towards the end of World War II. Many very bloody battles have been fought here and in other islands. My father is there, a US Marine who acts as a Japanese translator. He has fought in this fighting and has lost friends. The Japanese Emperor surrenders and the war is technically over, but many of the Japanese soldiers up in the hills have not heard the news

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or don't believe it. It's my father's responsibility to invite them to come down and to assure them they will be treated fairly. When they do, my father talks with them and gets to know them.

Then the news comes that my father will be transferred to Occupied Japan and the prisoners will be coming later. Several of the prisoners give him letters to send or take to their parents, and my father agrees to do so. Despite all the fighting and seeing the Japanese as the enemy, my father took the letters. One of the letters he personally delivered to the Yoshida family. They had believed that their son was dead, and my father was able to say, "No, he's coming home soon."

How does the story end? ... Well actually it doesn't. My father and Dr. Yoshida remained lifelong friends and *their* children still are friends today across the ocean.

Why did my father choose this course? Well, he grew up in this church and his family made friends with people in many other countries. I believe he chose to be a translator so that he could be a bridge builder and follow the way of peace. It makes me wonder how can I be a bridge builder, too, and follow that same way of peace?

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

It was 20 years ago when Dave Thomas wrote me a letter and he was furious. I had just invited the congregation to join me at a vigil and a protest at Ground Zero, which is a peace encampment located right outside the Bremerton naval station. Dave wrote back. And he told me, "I am a World War II vet and I know a thing or two about war you need to know, Peter."

Well in my 30-something-year-old self, thankfully, I picked up the phone and I called Dave and I invited us to have a conversation together. We each listen to each other's stories, mine about my own story and relation in connection to protesting nuclear weapons as a way to peace, and Dave has his experience as a World War II vet and how that experience of war had changed his life, including his deep longing and hungering for peace.

Instead of preaching the sermon that I was already to preach myself, I knew at that time that we needed to do something different. And this was a time for Dave and I to preach together, to share two very different perspectives and very different lives – and a very different commonality about our hunger and on longing for peace in our lives and peace in our world.

We took that sermon out on the road we went to the Rotary Club, the Lions Club. It was quite a little kerfuffle for a while. And, you know, thanks to that experience, and thanks to Dave Thomas and somebody who became a dear, dear friend. I realized that, before, I thought I knew what preaching was about, but thanks to Dave Thomas I learned a whole new thing about what preaching might be.

Becca McMullen, UCUC member

Before my daughter was born, I thought I knew about parenting. I knew I wanted something different than what many of us had. I wanted a way of peace. I was committed to no hitting, no yelling, no threats, and no shaming. And that sounds great ... until you hit a real challenge, and for us that was bedtime. So how do you do it? How do you hold a limit, any limit – have bedtime – when you're walking the way of peace?

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Okay, okay! I knew I was off the path. And we now had some bad behavior all around. And eventually it was my community at church that pointed me to something new and something different. That was why truly got started with Peaceful Parenting. This style of parenting is grounded in listening and the connection – always the connection – with the parent and the child. You see, this child is a *real* person worthy of my respect. And this child has feelings so deep and complex that I may never truly understand them. And this child can make *good* decisions – but only when she's grounded in love and her cup is full.

So. Every day I would leave work, go get her at day care, come home, have dinner, cleanup, do some playing – cause you got to play! And then I would listen that kid into bed. *Clap. [Amen]* We were on a path! And some days it really worked.

But other times it just didn't. And on those days, I would dig deep and I would push away my bad feelings of doubt and anxiety and I would work harder at *connecting and listening*. I was gonna make way of peace happen!

But pretty soon I was exhausted. And I was angry **all the time** and we still couldn't go to bed. Pretty soon my cup was empty. And you know, it's hard to listen deeply and to connect with someone when your cup is empty. And that's when I realized *before* I was available to walk the way of peace with her, I needed to step back and walk into that peace with myself. Because, you see, as it happens I am a real person worthy of my own respect. And I have feelings, and my feelings are so deep and complicated that I may never truly understand them. And I *can* make good decisions; but only when I'm grounded in love and my cup is full. So! That's where we are.

We are walking in peace as a family. It's not a trick. And it's not easy. And we have good days and we have bad days and days that are in between. And the good days happen *only* when my cup is full and I can connect. – And that only happens when I remember to walk that way of peace first with myself.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Thank you, Becca.

It was such a time like ours when there was not peace in the land. It was months before the end of the Civil War. The nation was in turmoil and there was great anxiety in the land about how it was all going to turn out. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife, Fanny, had just died in a tragic fire the year before, and he was badly injured in trying to save her life. His son Charlie had just returned home from war, severely injured months before. And in a time in his life – and those times in our lives – when we might draw down and very tight and very close, Henry Longfellow heard something else singing to him that he called Christmas bells.¹

You know, it's just like this for all of us. In everything that keeps us down here and tough and stuck and tight and fearful and afraid, do you hear them as Longfellow heard them? The bells are ringing, and they are ringing in the lives and the stories of each other's lives who are teaching us to walk in this way that we call Jesus' way, a way of peace. In these days of great kerfuffle, may we lean into each other, may we listen deeply to each other, and may we guide each other in the way of peace. f– Amen.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed 12/20/2018

ⁱ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. "Christmas Bells" Published in book of poetry, *Flower-de-Luce* (1867). Information from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Wadsworth_Longfellow

The following text of the poem is from http://www.hwlongfellow.org/poems_poem.php?pid=40, accessed 1/02/2019.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"