

“Prophetic Prolepsis and Peace”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

12-9-18 Second Sunday of Advent

Based upon Luke 1:57-80; Rom. 14:17-19

Last week we began the Advent season by hearing the prophet Jeremiah’s hope-inspiring assurance that God keeps God’s promises. This week, Zechariah, a priest who lived about 600 or so years after Jeremiah, celebrates those promises fulfilled both with his name, which means “God remembered” in Hebrew, and with his song, which has been known throughout the centuries as “*the Benedictus*” after the first word of his proclamation in Latin. Luke wrote his birth narrative like a musical, in which the key players burst into song as spontaneously and uncontrollably as the characters in the great Rogers and Hammerstein classics do. Mary hears the news she’s going to bear a Savior, and she starts to sing. Zechariah is so moved at his son’s naming ceremony that he too, cannot help but sing. No one knows if they really sang a note or spoke a word in those moments, of course, but the canticles about the Good News that Luke put on their lips have lifted hearts and inspired minds for millennia.

Zechariah, as I told the children, was John the Baptist’s father. One of the reasons he was so happy at John’s naming ceremony is that he was finally able to speak or sing after nine months of holy silencing. The angel Gabriel had rendered him mute for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy because when Gabriel had announced that Elizabeth, who was both old and barren, was going to bear a son who would be “great in the sight of the Lord,” Zechariah had had the nerve to ask, “How will I know that this is so?” For the record, Mary asked almost the same thing when Gabriel told her she was going to bear the Savior of the world, and she was not punished for her inquiry. But Zechariah was a priest, so apparently Gabriel felt that he should know better than to respond to a divine proclamation with incredulity. As a servant of God, it was his business to know that God keeps God’s promises, however improbable or impossible they seem. Anyway, for nine or ten long months Zechariah had plenty of time to contemplate Gabriel’s words. It’s not surprising, therefore, that when his tongue was finally untied for John’s naming ceremony, Zechariah broke his silence by praising God with a song about – you guessed it – how God had kept God’s promises.

It’s a beautiful song, but also a fascinating one because it’s not what you would expect from the father of the newborn who would one day be a great prophet. Two-thirds of the song is not about his beloved baby John. The bulk of the canticle is about God, celebrating in the past tense all that God had done in Jesus, even though he was not yet born. “He has redeemed them,” Zechariah sang. “He has raised up a mighty savior; he has shown the mercy promised; he has remembered his holy covenant.” None of these things had happened yet, and none of them were things that Gabriel had said would happen when he told Zechariah about John’s coming. So from a theological standpoint, this makes this text a prophetic one in the sense that it speaks of events yet to come.

From a literary standpoint, this is a “proleptic” text for the same reason. *Prolepsis* is my new favorite vocabulary word, which I learned this past week. It means not just to speak with anticipation about the future, but to speak as if future events have already been accomplished.

The example many dictionaries provide of prolepsis in a sentence is: “He was a dead man the minute he walked into the room.” Contemporary writers use prolepsis to foreshadow for their readers future plot twists before they unfold. Thousands of years ago, Luke did the same thing for his readers. He wrote his gospel after Jesus had been crucified and raised, and therefore knew that God’s promises had been fulfilled in him. Accordingly, most scholars believe that Luke took an existing Christian hymn of praise from his time, and adapted it into Zechariah’s prophetic proclamation, to make it clear from the beginning of his gospel how it was going to end. Luke wanted to fill his readers with hope and anticipation from the very beginning.

The canticle starts with the messianic promises connected to David that we talked about last week, and moves on to the Abrahamic covenant also mentioned by Jeremiah. Then, in order to make the song appropriate to the context, Luke inserts a little paternal moment in which Zechariah predicts what John will do to prepare the way. Finally, the whole thing concludes with Zechariah summarizing why God has gone to the trouble to execute these plans and promises: to “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Since we, like Luke, begin the Gospel story every Advent already knowing how it’s going to end at Easter, the proleptic passages about Jesus in the first two-thirds of the canticle may be grammatically surprising at first reading, but they are not theologically surprising in their content. Zechariah celebrates what we constantly celebrate, the good news that Jesus came and redeemed humanity. He fulfilled God’s promises to David and Abraham, and saved our souls with his mercy and righteousness. But living as we do in an already-not-yet-time when it comes to the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth, we can’t help but notice that the last part of Zechariah’s song about peace still remains unfulfilled. Even with Jesus as a light in our darkness showing us the way, world peace in our day still seems like an impossible dream, not a visible reality. So I have found myself wondering this past week what might be different in our lives if we lived our lives as Zechariah sang. What if we lived as those who knew without a doubt that just as God’s promise of salvation in Christ came true, God’s promise of peace would also be fulfilled sometime in the future?

In the sci-fi thriller *Arrival*, the main character Louise, played by Amy Adams, knows this about her future.¹ (I know I’ve preached on the unique language used in this movie before, but it’s one of those movies which has hundreds of illustrations in it, and lately seems to me to be particularly apt and prophetic in the wisdom it teaches given the state of our world.) The premise of the movie is that twelve space ships that look like massive metallic cloves of garlic floating on their ends arrive on earth and scatter themselves around the globe. They hover over the ground, but do not do anything else. So the most powerful nations of the world all find themselves in the position of having to find a way to communicate with the aliens, called Heptapods, to figure out why they are there and what they want. Louise is the linguist charged with this task in the United States. As she works with the creatures, she discovers that they do not see the world, or travel in time, in the same way humans do. They are not linear thinkers or beings bound to live forever in the present. They are from the future, and come to bring a gift to humanity as a thank you for

¹ *Arrival*, film directed by Denis Villeneuve, screenplay by Eric Heisserer, (based on the story "Story of Your Life" written by Ted Chiang), featuring Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner and Forest Whitaker, (FilmNation Entertainment, 2016).

something human beings do for them three thousand years in the future. The thank-you that they offer in their past, is necessary in order to get humanity to the place where they can help the Heptapods in their future.

While Louise is sorting all of this out, the tensions between nations continue to escalate. Filled with fear because of communication problems with the aliens, some nations' leaders want to try to blow them up; others do not. All of the nations are suspicious of sharing their discoveries with one another fearing that the aliens have come to start a war between them. Eventually it does appear as if a war of apocalyptic proportions is inevitable. But, *[spoiler alert]*, in a last-ditch effort to prevent that, Louise goes to her Heptapods on her own to ask for their help, and learns from them that they have enabled her to see and be in the future as they can. She can see the time when all the nations on Earth are at peace, the time when they are united by a universal language and world view. Louise is the only one who can see this, so it falls to her to travel back and forth in time in her memory to figure out what steps she took to enable the nations to embrace peace instead of destroying one another. Then she takes those steps even though they endanger her because she knows they will lead to peace.

Now you may be thinking, that's all well and good Elizabeth, but that's a movie, not reality, and as far as the idea of aliens coming to lead us to world peace goes, you'd be right. But there is real evidence that intentional, proleptic thinking can and does change the decisions people make and how they live in the world. Years ago, I read about a therapist, I think it was Barry Kaufmann, who used prolepsis to help people heal.² He had a young female patient who was chronically depressed and frequently ill because she lived alone and wanted to be married. She was convinced that she couldn't or wouldn't be happy unless or until she was married. So every day that went by while she was single seemed like a punishment. She did not pursue the activities she loved or do things for herself or others. She just waited in misery fearing that she would never find the man of her dreams. Finally, after trying everything else without success to change the woman's perspective, the therapist grabbed a piece of paper and wrote on it, "I guarantee that three years from now you will find the man who will be the love of your life and get married." "That's ridiculous," the woman said when he gave her the paper. "You can't possibly guarantee that." But she kept the paper anyway. Every day she looked at it, and in a few months, the therapist was pleased to see that she was becoming an entirely different woman. "If I have only three years before I get married," she said, "I want to get my graduate degree now. If I have only three years before I will be shaping my life according to someone else's rhythm, I am going to do all the things I really love now." And so on and so on. Instead of despairing about the impossibility of her dream or passively waiting for happiness, she began living with the confidence, determination, and joy of someone who knew her future was filled with love. In the process, she made herself happy and therefore more lovable and open to that future.

Do you believe that world peace is really possible, if not in our lifetimes, at least some day? You wouldn't be alone if you said "No." But as improbable as that seems, it is no more improbable than John the Baptist's and Jesus' births, and certainly no more so than the Resurrection. So these events from our past serve as our guarantee, our Heptapods' gift, if you

² Unfortunately, I could not find the precise source again this week. But this kind of idea is discussed in Barry Neil Kaufman's book [Happiness is a Choice](#) (Ballantine Books, 1994).

will, for our future. Since we, as members of the priesthood of all believers, know like Zechariah did that God keeps God's promises, instead of questioning the probability of peace, we can use this pregnant in-between time to live proleptically toward that day. How would you change the way you live if you knew that it was possible to achieve world peace within the next fifty years? Would you argue less and forgive more? Would you insist that our leaders advocate for diplomacy more than war? Would you invest in efforts to solve global problems more than in pleasing yourself? How would you see your "enemies" if you knew without a doubt that in the future you would be allies?

In another great movie, *Apollo 13*,³ which was based upon a real event in space not on science fiction, the astronauts on the Apollo 13 spacecraft had to find a way to survive and get home after an explosion irrevocably damaged their ship. One of the first things they had to figure out was how to build out of the odds and ends in their space capsule an air filter to remove the carbon dioxide they were breathing out, because it was poisoning their limited air. So mission control on Earth gathered a bunch of engineers in a room, and poured on a table in front of them a pile of the stuff that was available. "This is all you have to work with because this is all they have to work with up there," they were told. Eventually, the engineers ended up "Macgyvering" a workable filter out of cardboard, tape, and other supplies that never were intended for such a purpose. At the time that seemed nothing short of miraculous. But what if the astronauts had started the mission with the knowledge that something big was going to go wrong yet they would survive? What if the engineers had started their work knowing that they truly had everything they needed on the table to make the machine? Don't you think that would have changed how they handled the challenges at least a little bit? At the very least, I think, it would have made them more persistent and less panicked. Throughout the mission everyone would have been in problem-solving mode instead of feeling frantic or filled with despair.

We are living in a time of huge conflict, both between nations and between individuals within nations. For many, working for peace and reconciliation is less of a priority than working for power and domination because "better get them before they get you" is the underlying belief governing many interactions today. But that doesn't mean that world peace is impossible. We know it is because it is part of God's plan. We know that by "the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high did break in to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in the way of peace." So as we prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate that moment in a few weeks, this is a good time to ask ourselves what we are doing to further humankind along that way. In effect, God has told us through Christ that we have everything we need on the table which is our world, to get us there. We may not be able to do everything ourselves, but our piece of the puzzle matters. Instead of waiting for our Prince of Peace to return and fix everything for us, right now we can and should take the steps that will make us all happier and safer. We need to be in problem-solving mode, trusting that God will show us the way.

³ *Apollo 13*, film, directed by Ron Howard, based upon a screenplay William Broyles Jr. and Al Reinert (based upon books by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger), featuring Tom Hanks, Bill Paxton and Kevin Bacon, (Imagine Entertainment, 1995).

The Rev. Dr. Harold Warlick Jr. once wrote, “If we cannot dream of a common world community with all its members living in peace with one another, we will have misunderstood the past, miscalculated the present, and ignored the future.... There is a force for peace in this world that can be beaten back for decades, even centuries. But it can never be kept totally down. Our God is a God of resurrection.”⁴ We know through Christ how the story began and how it ends. We know through Christ that God is with us always. Not only is that all we need to know to sing God praise here and now, it is also all we need to know to start heading toward God’s future now. How does humankind get there? What is our part? Thank goodness God knows the answer, and has sent a savior to show us the way. Amen.

⁴ Warlick, Harold, C., Jr., “*Keep Sending Out the Dove*” in THE LIVING PULPIT, “Shalom” issue, Vol 15, No. 4, Oct.- Dec. 2006, 14-15.