

# Waiting for Peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 December, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Advent 2B

Isaiah 40:1-11; Contemporary Reading:  
“*I, May I Rest in Peace ...*” by Yehuda Amichai; Mark 1:1-8

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Wilderness!

Not a place we usually think of going to! Usually a place we want to get away from! The wilderness. And yet, the wilderness is a place where a lot happens.

It's a place of change, new beginnings. Transformation, and new life.

When the people of Israel heard John the Baptist's teachings, what would Good News have been to them?

These were the people of the towns and villages, workers and tradespeople, certainly some business people and yes, some from the Temple and representing the Roman Emperor.

John spoke of Good News coming and to be prepared for it by putting the past behind them and being ready to start the new life that God was making.

It was a message of conversion: it's time for change! He came from the wilderness. Something new is happening.

It was a big ask. Why would anyone listen? Why would anyone follow? Why would you commit to something you didn't know what you were getting into, but knew it would change everything?

Maybe if we'd asked you that, back in about February this year, and you knew what was coming! (*I'm away that month! That year!*)

Now it didn't matter your culture or your status or your background or your income or your ethnicity – although it certainly did in those quarters everywhere else.

It didn't matter to John! It was for anyone who came and was willing to be baptised, in the river, with water, as a sign they were making ready for something new and that the old ways would be put behind them.

This was an inclusive community being formed; no stratification here. It was prepared to start with forgiveness - meaning nothing from the past now mattered as you committed to live in this new way that was coming.

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Sunday 06 Dec 2020, Advent 2B

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We might think of that when we're moving house, that we've had big changes – and that's behind us. And, how often have Gareth and I gone to a kitchen cupboard and – it's not in the cupboard anymore! No, that's three kitchens ago!

What was coming?

What was coming was a new way of living and being in the world – and it was for everyone.

Do the words Son of God, Bearer of Good News, Bringer of Peace, Ruler of the Kingdom sound familiar to you? Well of course they do. They did to the people there with John at the river as well, for these were titles claimed by the Roman Emperor.

So to suggest there might be One whom God had chosen to be a true Child of God, a Bearer of actual Good News, a Bringer of tangible Peace and One who would influence the entire world, was a big call. Some would say subversive - and perhaps that's exactly what it was when we look at the years ahead. But we're not there yet!

But it need not have been because it is for everyone, but you need to be willing to live with everyone, respectful of freedom and inclusion and everyone having enough to share and make the world a safe, bountiful, caring place to live. That sounds like the dream, doesn't it?

Such was the oppressed way of life at the time, (the Emperor cared first for Rome and for himself before the people of the many countries that Rome had conquered).

So, it's not surprising that John's message carried some weight with the people, especially those who were not in high ranking. Especially when it came wrapped in familiar images people knew from their ancient scriptures - images that promoted a sense of continuity.

The God of Jesus is the God they already knew, the God who promises good – and who delivers.

They knew this God and this promise:

From Isaiah 40:3 that Mark alludes to: *a voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for God.*

And Exodus 23:20: *I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.*

And from Malachi 3:1: *See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.*

I don't usually make quotes like that, but it's right there in Mark!

Many were ready to commit to this new thing that was taking place. They must have felt excited and, I expect, scared – all at the same time. Ever felt that? Yeah, of course. Excitement and scared go together sometimes. Something new is about to happen and you're on the threshold of it!

After all it was inclusive - a big break away from the current way of doing things; it was daring and it was confronting and would immediately affect every part of their lives – not just when they're at work, or not just when they're at home, or not just when they went shopping, or not just when they invested – but every part of their lives - if they took it at all seriously.

Now we are in Advent, leading to the celebration of the coming of the One referred to by John.

Matthew gives us a genealogy, a birth narrative and visits of magi. There are stars!

Luke relates stories of the family of John and Jesus, and there are prophecies and there's a census and a trip, and a pregnancy and a birth and shepherds and angels.

None of that for Mark! Mark jumps straight to the adult life of the One who will take up where John leaves off.

John prepares the way, Jesus builds on the preparation. That's it, let's get on with it!

Mark is clear that the very presence of Jesus is Good News as is all that Jesus brings.

Nothing else matters. It's time to get on with things. He's not worried about anything else!

John's presence also tells us something of the new thing taking place - calling on well-known images.

John lives simply. What he was wearing was simple, almost rough and, I reckon, itchy!

He was dependent upon what God provides, living on locusts and honey. (OK you might like honey but you're not so sure about locusts? Turns out that they're a bit of a delicacy - and they might be on our plate one day in the future, because there's a whole lot of food and insects research going on.)

John's very presence, how he dresses and his lifestyle is an immediate and stark contrast to the religious and political rulers of the day.

He just depends on God and what God provides and that's enough! Like all great prophets, they live out the message!

John's baptism was with water - there's nothing new here. Baptism was well known in the culture - but it was often self-administered and undertaken regularly.

What of forgiveness?

Well that was the domain of the Temple.

We could be crossing lines here, especially when John then pointed to Jesus as the One who would baptise with Spirit. Not just a change of mind but an indwelling of nothing less than the Divine inspiration.

So what was this new, great Baptism of the Spirit?

How would it manifest? There's been all sorts of theories and practices over the centuries.

Luke identified it as Pentecost. That was it!

Not surprisingly Mark sees it fulfilled in Jesus' Ministry. Jesus and Jesus' ministry. That's it! No big fanfare, no, not interested in fanfare much.

Not the great refining fire of which to be afraid, but a growing awakening to the Presence who inspires and encourages and nurtures new life based on Divine Love for all of creation.

This is a radical message - that calls into question all that would keep people oppressed. All that would not recognise the earth's bounty as blessing and to be honoured. It was calling all that into question.

It is a message of justice - not to bring about punishment for it is based on love, not that kind of judgement – but for things to be put in their right place. But to bring about grace that people may find life and live well and in peace together.

What justice, what peace do we wait for today?

I'm afraid the list is extremely long. Peace in tormented minds and abusive homes. Peace between cultures and religions that all have at their base the wellbeing of people, yet who more readily fight rather than work together.

There is a growing nationalism across the world that, in its simplest form, has people wanting to reclaim respect for their land and who they are, and their culture. But in its harshest form can be intolerant and lead to war.

World-wide, First Peoples seek to have a voice in their own land and to be treated with respect by those who have conquered their lands and often crushed their culture and ways in the process.

Young innocents are trained for war while others starve. All the while the earth groans, needing to be free from the distorted uses we have put it through.

The climate changes, we live in a viral Pandemic. It's a long list.

Is it any longer than the list of the first century when John cried out in the wilderness? I actually doubt it.

It may be a different list, it may be a more urgent list for the earth and its people. But it was quite a list the people of the first century faced and in their individual lives. It was hard to see a way through it, as we do now.

Yet what followed did make a difference.

But, like dealing with a Pandemic, we can never be complacent. Unfortunately throughout history we have easily fallen for the idea that we had done enough.

Alas, it never ends, for it is life! The solution to injustice to lack of peace, is not a once-and-for-all fix, a magical wand to prevent anything bad happening in the future. Oh please, if it was possible, that would be wonderful.

It is, as John promoted, a change of ways. We need to be ready to make every moment of every day.

And as Jesus demonstrated and offered, a way of living in tune with the Spirit that gives us life.

We put the old behind us, we take on the new and are inspired and encouraged and nurtured and given wisdom in our relationship with God.

As we move through this period of Waiting, waiting for Peace, I recall Gareth's message last week (see, I was listening!) telling us that Waiting is an active way of being. Waiting isn't static. It's a very active time, just like the wilderness is. A very "filled with life" space.

So as we wait for Peace, as we prepare to celebrate the small life full of promise in our midst that we put in a manger and sing songs about, we need to be a people of peace, living out the ways of peacemaking, of forgiving, putting the past behind.

Of inclusion, of respect and of radical thinking that will bring about peace in all we do and all we promote and support in the world.

Not just when we're at work, and not just when we're at home and not just when we go shopping and not when we just do our investments – but all the time.

That's how God works with us all and always will, because it is, always, about life and how we live and relate.

The Good News is not about some big impressive Superhero who will come and do the work for us – you know, with a big Thor club or something like that.

It's our life - and it needs to be our peace that only we can make, because we are the ones who are not at peace. Humanity!

But we are not alone. The Spirit of the Divine Presence is powerfully present and willing to guide us and inspire us all, every moment of every day.

Just short of 3 weeks from now we will be celebrating the coming of the One who has brought us the means to live in peace. Take note of the beginnings – and yes, Mark won't help us there, but Luke and Matthew will, with some of the stories of the birth.

Take note of the beginnings of the life that has touched people for over two thousand years.

It was a human life, carrying the Divine Presence, a life of the Spirit presented to us in very humble, very small beginnings, needing our love, our care and our nurture and our commitment for it to become the adult John shouted about and we honour.

God was revealed to us by one we first of all had to feed and clothe and love.

It was small beginnings then and a commitment to let them grow that allowed that life to be all it was and remains for us now.

Small beginnings, starting here, starting now, in humble, unexpected places, through unexpected people, nurtured to the fullest expression possible.

This is how we wait for Peace.