

Call to Worship Psalm 122 NRSV

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Prayer of Invocation

Loving God, our hearts are filled with expectation.

They are filled with love and a passion for you.

We have a hunger and a thirst that only you can fill.

Lord, we enter this moment with anticipation.

We know that in your presence, bodies are healed,

broken dreams are restored, and lives are transformed,

because with you, all things are possible Amen.

The Word Luke 1:68-79 Common English Bible

Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy covenant, the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live.

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins.

Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace.

Living the Word

Early in our marriage Bob and I made the decision that our Christmas gift to each other would be to buy the stamps needed to send a Christmas letter to all of our family and friends that we don't often see. That way we hoped they would return news of their families. Christmas Cards have been arriving for a month already. I have most of mine sent, but not done yet. It is a good thing Christmas goes for 12 days!

Our 'Call to Worship' this morning from Psalm 122 has a line that may be the best Christmas Card line that I've read so far this season: "For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.'" That is what Jesus was born for, to come to us and try to convince us by his words and actions that peace comes from within us. It isn't something you can buy or earn, but something you have to find within yourself.

Zechariah's Song

The peace was there before Christ, it is innate in all humanity, but sometimes we have to dig deep to find it. Luke 1:68-79 is Zechariah's song. In these verses Zechariah tells us about the hope we have when we find that inner peace:

- saved from our enemies
- saved from the power of all who hate us
- light for those sitting in darkness

- the ability to serve God without fear
- Peace within us

Zechariah lived in a time when it was very difficult to believe in God's power. For his whole life he was oppressed by the Romans - a government that took what it wished from the Jewish population, forcing them to work to pay heavy taxes, leaving little for themselves and their families to live on. If that wasn't bad enough, his own Jewish religious leaders made life complicated by taking the 'Word of God' and embellishing it with rule upon rule, until it was difficult to enjoy the little that they had.

Add to this his personal demons, as his wife had not been able to produce a child, who would care for them as they were now advancing into their old age and to carry on the family name. This alone was a huge obstacle in their culture. Zechariah found little peace within himself, yet as a good Jew, he went through the motions of taking his turn tending the temple fire.

On this day it was different. While doing his duty, the Holy Spirit came to him and told him Elizabeth would conceive now, at her advanced age and he would have a son. Zechariah argued with the Holy Spirit, a human response which seems reasonable after he had prayed for years for this child and surely given up all hope. So God made him mute, unable to speak for the length of the pregnancy.

There is a lot of fear that can be found in the nine months of child bearing. When it was my turn I remember telling myself, over and over that women had been delivering babies since the beginning of time and today almost all survive childbirth, and so would I. We are all apprehensive of things we can't understand and that are new experiences.

That is why God, as the Great Creator gives us a nine month gestation time to contemplate and meditate on what is to happen. It's not just about the birth but it is about the rest of your lifetime as a parent.

Zechariah had this time to plan and prepare, to pray and process, and watch for the miracles that he found happening before him through Elizabeth's pregnancy and the visit from Mary. He used it to find peace within himself. To surrender his disbelief and fear and replace it with the trust in God that brings forth the peace within us.

It seems that the killing of innocent people keeps growing more and more. We believe that all of those martyred, just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, will spend Christmas with Jesus, but that is little consolation for the families who now are coming out of the stages of trauma and denial to feel deeply the loss of their loved ones. Pray for them, that they can begin to heal and know God's peace.

One Christmas season I made a home visit to an elderly woman named Jinny. We talked of many things, we prayed and shared Holy Communion. But before I left she asked me to wait while she organized her Christmas giving to the church. One portion was a gift to the Sunday School in memory of her grandson Phillip, who died 25 or so years ago at age 7 of a sudden illness.

As she shared his story, I saw that she still carried the grief, all of these years later. She found a peace within by supporting the Sunday School each year with a gift. Grief is a pain that some can put aside and ignore, but it never can begin to heal until a way is found to find that peace within.

202 People Look East

Eleanor Farjeon, who wrote the words to 'People Look East' in 1928, received much encouragement as a writer from her parents Benjamin Farjeon, a successful writer and novelist, and Maggie Farjeon, daughter of an American actor. One brother, Harry, was a composer and her other brothers, Joseph and Herbert, were writers.

"Nellie," as she was affectionately called by her parents, was a small, shy young girl. She had a vital imagination. Her father encouraged her to write from the age of 5. At age 18, she penned the lines for an

operetta composed by her brother Harry.

Her best-known work is the hymn "Morning Has Broken", but in England she is beloved as the author of more than 80 children's books and poem collections.

"People, Look East" is the direction of the rising sun and, in the history of Christianity, the direction of the coming Messiah. The verses speak of the preparation of home, but also of our hearts. Verse 1 – *Prepare*; verse 2 – *Be Glad*; verse 3 – *Keep Watch* and verse 4 – *Announce* (Repeat).

In verse 3 we find these words: "*shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as the sun and moon together.*" Beyond the difficulties and complications and losses that frosty weather may bring us, Jesus' coming is the bright light to dispel the dark mood of our winters.

Verse 4 begins: "*Angels announce with shouts of mirth*" (Mirth is laughter, delight, great joy) "*the Lord is coming.*" The angels can laugh because they take pleasure in God's peace and joy eternally. They 'get it;' they understand what it takes and where to go to find the peace within. They know that Christ is brighter than even the darkest grief.

240 Hark the Herald Angels Sing

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is a Christmas carol that first appeared in 1739 in the collection *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, having been written by Charles Wesley. A somber man, Wesley had requested and received slow and solemn music for his lyrics, not the joyful tune we now sing.

What is more, Wesley's original opening phrase is "*Hark! how all the welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings*". (the word Welkin meaning the heaven.) The popular version is the result of alterations by Wesley's co-worker, George Whitefield, who changed the opening phrase to the familiar one we now sing. A hundred years after the publication of this hymn, in 1840, Felix Mendelssohn composed a cantata to commemorate Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, and it is music from this cantata, we know today.

Let's begin with the word 'Hark!' It is used here to get our attention as the Angels have a message to tell, and they don't want us to miss it, note the exclamation mark...this is important. 'The Herald Angel' isn't an angel named Harold, but an angel who would be a King's Herald. You have seen the pictures of the royal throne with a person on each side holding a trumpet, playing to announce the King. That is what the angels are doing, because they are herald angels.

Once again we read in these words that the angels understand about God's peace that is meant for all of us and they want everyone to know. Zechariah had something to herald, but because he didn't believe he had to keep silent for a while to figure out what it was. Wesley wrote these words, because he believed that the heavens are telling us to find the peace that Jesus brought for us, by looking within.

I have cynically chuckled for years at the image of the somber Charles Wesley, standing in a busy shopping mall during Advent, hearing his words, to the upbeat music, which were added, a century after his death. I have asked over and over in my head "Well, what do you think, Charles of the rush of people who don't really seem to notice the music around them?"

This year as I truly explored this hymn, an answer came to me: "You see, Cathy, that is what the song is all about: trying to herald the people with the announcement of the good news of the coming of Christ.

I am there, thrilled with music uplifting enough to be played in the Malls or anywhere that people need to hear this good news, and some each year finally get what it is all about." Then I am reminded that the more I know, the less I understand; and that my need to seek God in all things, is an ongoing process.

We also have something to herald – Hark! The Herald people sing: Glory to the new born King. Jesus arrives again and again with glory, peace, joy, light and life for us to know within ourselves. Verse 2 “*veiled in flesh the God-head see, hail the incarnate Deity.*” Jesus came to us as God, with skin on.

In Verse 3 we find: “*Light and Life to All He brings.*” The light that Zechariah found within himself at the birth of his son, John and the freeing of his tongue once again for speech, so he could give us his song; the light that is within us, that conquers fear and the powers of evil that may hold us; the life of peace we can have when we surrender our fears, by trusting God to handle things. “*Born to give us second birth,*” - Always a second chance, and the opportunity to begin again.

I have a saying in my kitchen that says: “Don’t tell God how big your mountain is. Instead tell the mountain how big your God is.” When you can believe this, when you can live this, you will know you are discovering the peace God offers you that is deep within. Like Zechariah, there are times when we are just going through the motions of church, of prayer, of singing. If we want the ‘deep within’ peace, we have to dig deeper and think greater.

We are now only a few days away from Christmas...if you aren’t prepared in your heart enough to know God’s peace, I give you this line once again from Psalm 122: “For the sake of my relatives and friends, I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’”