**Prophetic Peace**
**December 7, 2025**

Matthew 3:1-12
Malachi 3:1-6a

My daughter is adopted. She was 10 months old when I met her and became her Mom. Like most modern adopted families, talking to her about her adoption story was something I did right from the very beginning. When she was about 3, she came home after an afternoon play date with the neighbor twins (who were a year older than her), and she said to me, “Mommy, Chrissy and Brooke said they came out of their mommy’s tummy. I told them I came out of an airplane!” As the years went by, she got a better understanding of the role of the airplane – but the telling of her origin story remained, and still remains, an important part of her identity and her journey in finding herself. To this day, when she makes a new friend, she pulls out the pictures from China and her early toddler years to introduce herself more fully.

Origin stories are important for all of us. I suspect that most of you know yours. They can be funny or poignant or even tragic – and they matter because they provide the context for our identity and formation. They often explain how we came to be who we are and they can even point to our purpose

-- the reasons why it is important that we **are** who we are and what we are called to do because of who we are. We know our place in our families and in the world, in part, because we understand where we came from.

Jesus had an origin story. If you have been a regular attender in a church you know it as well as you know your own. The part of that origin story we focus on during this second Sunday of Advent is Matthew's account of the announcement of Jesus's ministry by John the Baptist.

The book of Matthew was written not long after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. It was written for a Jewish audience who had suffered a profound and painful loss when the Temple fell. Their spiritual, cultural and ethnic heart had been reduced to rubble. It is in this context that John the Baptist comes on the scene.

John was a strange character. We are told he lived in the wilderness, separated from the mainstream of life, wearing animal skins and delivering fiery preaching. I dare say that if he were living in 2025, we would likely refer him for a mental health assessment. It is a surprise to me that anyone listened to his disruptive, fiery message, but listen they did. He gained the attention of many in Israel and influenced large numbers of people to prepare for Jesus.

His announcement of Jesus and the purpose of Jesus's ministry are a wake-up call to the faithful. He calls this discouraged and disheartened and, perhaps, complacent Jewish nation to rise up and act in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. "Repent!" he cries. Change your heart and your mind because the time of waiting is over. He is here – the one whom Isaish foretold. John baptizes people with urgency, and he tries to help them understand what the impact of this Messiah would be.

As you know, it is likely that most Jews longed for a Messiah who would defeat Rome and establish peace and tranquility. For a people whose origin story and ongoing story was full of war and threat, captivity and oppressors, surely the Messiah would bring the peace they had longed for but never enjoyed.

John breaks the news that this is **not** who Jesus will be. He will not oppress anyone else– not even the Romans. Those who foretold of his coming – Malachi, Isaiah and now John the Baptist do not create the narrative of Jesus as a peace maker, but rather Jesus as a disruptor. Jesus will not seek conflict, but John makes it clear that his ministry will create conflict, because the Kingdom of God Jesus will usher in is peace defined by justice.

In the words of our prelude today, “Peace will pervade more than forest and field: God will transfigure the violence concealed deep in the heart and in systems of gain, ripe for the judgment the Lord will ordain.” People’s hearts must be changed and so must the systems that perpetuate injustice and inequity – the systems so often designed and protected not just by the civil authorities, but also by the privileged religious.

The worst wrath we hear from John and, in the years that follow, the harshest criticisms we hear from Jesus, are directed toward religious leaders who are perpetuating injustice. The religious establishment had distorted God’s message for their own gain, and neither John nor Jesus will have any of it.

This advent we reclaim their proclamation that authentic peace is prophetic. It is not passive or polite or sentimental. It is forged in the fire of truth-telling. It demands more of us than comfort – it calls for the courage to speak the truth, confronting injustice and building peace by dismantling and rebuilding the systems that marginalize.

I was listening to NPR the other day as they gave a report on the so-called “peace negotiations” between Ukraine and Russia. The retired National Security Advisor they were interviewing made the point that “surrender” is not the same as peace. If Ukraine gives Russia the parts of Ukraine that Russia now

occupies, and if Ukraine agrees to never join NATO so that it will never be stronger than Russia, the fighting will end for now. But what is accomplished should not be called “peace” because sustainable peace can only be built when aggression is dismantled and there is justice for all parties. The NSA person echoed a bumper sticker you sometimes see on cars – “No justice. No peace.”

Malachi brings us a similar message. The Messenger of the Covenant is coming, he says, and he warns that it will not be easy to be part of the kingdom this Messenger is ushering in. “For he is like a refiner’s fire…he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver…”

Refiner’s fire – a fire so hot that impurities are removed from the metal. The refining process is about clearing away what obscures the true essence, the most valuable substance. Refining is necessary because transformation is needed – both of individuals and of systems.

This Messenger of the Covenant, this Messiah, this Jesus – will demand not purity of ideology or law, but purity of heart and mind, leading to actions that address injustice. Judgment will come. But God’s judgment now is not punitive, it is purifying. Both Malachi and John are clear: The coming of the Messiah will change the very purpose of the people of faith.

We are at a crossroads, seeking to re-clarify or rediscover our purpose as a congregation now. How does the origin story of the Church of the Brethren shape us? Probably most profoundly as a people of peace and service. How does our origin story as a congregation inform us? Well, we were originally a group of Brethren that met as a house church for years before assistance came from the denomination. We were a church family wanting to be together and serve the city of Richmond.

We remember our origins and embrace our identity as we answer the question of purpose anew – what is our specific purpose now, as we are now? Where is our place in the metropolitan faith community and in the Richmond community generally? We pray and we will discern – but right now it is not clear where we will end up.

However, this I know for sure: The peace we must embody is not only that of nonviolence but also of justice. The Messiah who has come calls us to shed complacency, and resist disillusionment and discouragement. He calls us to be clear-eyed about where injustice is occurring and to hold oppressors accountable. He calls us to have the courage to proclaim God's peace by advocating for and standing with the poor, the immigrants, the homeless and those who are disenfranchised by the powerful. Whatever our specific purpose is in this time. it must

be marked by an active and persistent effort to pursue justice.

We hear John's call again this Advent season. We remember the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, modeling the way. We commit to the ongoing work of God's people in our time and place, building a peace that is not simply the absence of conflict but rather speaking the truth, acting in love and seeking justice for all.