

Sermon Title: **“For Peace: Not Me”**

Bible: **Mark 1:1-8**

When: on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. Advent Wreath**

Today, we lit two candles on the Advent Wreath, which mean hope and peace. The Advent Wreath originally came from German Lutherans in the 16th century. At first, it was for home devotional practice to mark the four weeks of Advent. Later, in the late 19th century, the churches in Europe and in America began to use it for public worship services. The colors of the candles were uniform according to the liturgical color, purple or blue. And the third Sunday of Advent has been the Joy Sunday for centuries, whose color is rose or pink. A theme for each week was added, such as Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. These themes at that time worked well with their own one-year cycle for the lectionary. But now, with a three-year cycle, the themes are not quite synchronized with our Scripture readings. Some pastors recommend focusing on our current lectionary readings and discovering the theme or meaning rather than following the themes of the Advent Candle.

First of all, we are not Lutherans. But, we are Methodists who have open minds. So, we do not mind accepting other Christians' traditions, as they can be a means of grace to experience God's grace and love. When the family or our church members prepare and light the Advent Candles, and when we sing Advent songs together, we feel the presence of God, and we are ready and waiting for the coming of our baby Jesus. Perhaps the challenge is how to prepare the message. Even though the theme of each Advent Sunday and the lectionary readings are not in agreement, I try to make kind of a creative connection. I wrestle with the theme and the scripture reading based on our context. And I hope that you find something to reflect on from our worship service, and even from my message today.

## **2. For Peace: John the Baptist's Denial**

Today's scripture reading is about John the Baptist. At that time, John the Baptist was a great and very strange person, compared to other religious leaders. Other religious leaders might serve at the synagogues or the temple, but John was out in the wilderness. Where he stayed, what he wore, and what he ate was totally different. What he did was also different. People were required to go to the temple for the forgiveness of sins at that time. But John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins with water in the River Jordan. Baptism was not the mainline teaching at that time. Nevertheless, many people, according to today's scripture—the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem— came to John the Baptist. No one could ignore the power, popularity, and influence of John the Baptist.

All four Gospels mention John the Baptist. The Gospel of Mark, which is regarded as the oldest Gospel, began with the introduction of John the Baptist. Perhaps John the Baptist was the biggest rival to Jesus. Who baptized whom? Did Jesus baptize John? Or did John baptize Jesus? The origin of our Baptism is not from Jesus, but from John. If John was against Jesus, John would be not only the biggest rival, but also the most dangerous enemy to Jesus.

Many religious leaders at that time, like Pharisees, were against Jesus. They thought that only their teachings were right and any other teachings were wrong. So, when Jesus taught the good news, which was different from their teachings, they were against Jesus' message. They did not like the messages. They hated the messengers, too. They tried to kill the messenger Jesus himself, as they tried to kill John the Baptist. There had been jealousy, tension, conflict, and at the end, there was a death on one side.

However, what John the Baptist said was that it was "not me." He said, "I am not, I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals." John knew that he was not the one. John knew that he was not the way. When Jesus began his ministries, John's disciples came to John in prison. At that moment, John told his own disciples to follow Jesus, as Jesus was the Messiah. If you were John, could you tell your followers to go to another teacher? How did John feel at this moment?

Jesus praised John the Baptist. Jesus said, "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." Between Jesus and John the Baptist, there was no tension and there was no conflict. Jesus was humbly baptized by John. John sent his disciples to Jesus.

Jesus praised John as the greatest one. I believe that this was all because of John's self-denial. John might have been more popular and more influential than Jesus at first, but what John did was to deny himself. To John the Baptist, his fame, his influence, his title, his disciples, even the risk of his life was not important in front of Jesus Christ our Lord. Only his purpose to prepare the way of the Lord was important and came first. And there was true peace between John and Jesus!

### **3. Self-Denial: "I Am Not"**

To deny ourselves is always difficult. Maybe that's why we want to have many titles and wear many masks. I am a pastor. I am happy to be a pastor. But I prefer others to call me Hwapyoung, just my name, rather than Pastor and Rev. I know who I am and what I am. What I am and the title is important, but I do not want them to come first. To keep the title or the position might consume myself, my church, and others if I forget my calling. My calling is to serve the church, not to be called a pastor.

We might want to wear false masks to hide ourselves. But those masks are not us. Sometimes we want to be loved by all, and we think that it could be a lovely and peaceful life. But do we really believe that we can be loved by all others? It is not real life. Even Jesus could not be loved by all, even through his close disciples. Jesus had chosen twelve disciples, but one betrayed Jesus. If anyone wants to be loved by everyone, and to be at peace with everyone, it might be a false concept or false mask. Can we deny them and accept ourselves as we are? We cannot be loved by all, but to be sure, there are some who love you as you are.

What we are, what we do, and what we say can define ourselves. But it is not all of us.

What we eat, what we wear, and where we live tells many things about us. But it is not all of us. We are more than these things, because we are not only physical but also spiritual beings.

Sometimes to deny ourselves can be scary, because it might feel like losing everything and everyone. To deny ourselves means that we are more than anything else, including self-denial. When we deny ourselves, we can see another dimension of ourselves.

#### **4. Christmas Truce of 1914**

Recently we have heard of many conflicts, violence, and wars here and there:

Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas war, and another shooting at the University of Nevada. I do not know what to say for peace. And I learned this story. Have you heard of the Christmas Truce of 1914? I still cannot believe the Christmas Truce of 1914. The British and the German soldiers were fighting each other. To the British soldiers, the Germans were enemies. To the German soldiers, the British were enemies. It was during the First World War. Late on Christmas Eve in 1914, some soldiers began singing Christmas carols, and more soldiers on both sides joined in to sing the Christmas carols. The following day, on Christmas Day, there was no shooting, and the British and German soldiers met in no man's land, exchanged gifts, took photos, and some of them even played football, not American football, but soccer. The Christmas carols might have made them deny what they were. They were soldiers. But they were not soldiers for killing others, but soldiers for peace. When they denied what they were, they discovered who they were. They were just human beings. And there was peace.

Since 1914, our world has become more complicated, and I know how hard it is to end a war. The Korean War has still not officially ended yet. In 1953, the Armistice was signed. Armistice means a temporary agreement. But seventy years later, the tensions and conflict remain unresolved. But I still hope for peace and I still pray for peace! That's because we are not people of war, but people of hope and peace. These candle lights are small, but they shine through this Sanctuary and to you. And our prayers and efforts for peace will reach out to all the world.

### **Closing Prayer**

O Lord, we are not people of war, but people of hope and peace. When we hear the news of conflict, violence, and wars, we lift our prayers to you for peace. We give ourselves to you. Please use our lips and hands for peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.