

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, December 5, 2021
Second Sunday in Advent

“Where in the World Do We Find Peace These Days?”

Second of a four-part sermon series entitled “O Come, Advent”

Christian Scripture: Luke 3:1-6



Caiphas Nxumalo (South African, 1940–2002), *John the Baptist*, 1970. Linocut.
Source: *Christliche Kunst in Afrika*, p. 278.¹

Friends, do you remember our Tenebrae Service? The lights were all on. It was bright in the sanctuary. We sat at the table, the same table on which we celebrate Holy Communion today. Jesus sat with and offered us the Passover meal. His arrest was near. His crucifixion was imminent. As we and others betrayed Jesus that night, one by one, the candles’ lights went out. We heard the

¹ Victoria Emily Jones, “Advent, Day 7: Behold!”, *Art & Theology*, December 5, 2020. Found at: <https://artandtheology.org/2020/12/05/advent-day-7-behold/>, accessed December 4, 2021.

nails being driven-in. The last light went out. We sat in darkness. We were lost. Until Easter.

It is Advent 2021. Though we lit our first candle of hope last week, we are still in darkness. The worst humanitarian disaster in the world continues to unfold in Yemen. Ethiopia is tearing itself apart. Afghanistan reels as immigrants flee to our country. Migrants are on our Mexican border, desperate to enter. Russia and Ukraine continue to thrust toward one another's throats. Another mass murder in our schools occurred as we continue our country's perverted addiction to guns. The climate continues to change. The American West has little snow and thus there will be little water in the spring – all because of our country and the world are addicted to fossil fuels. My brothers Daniel Sicken and William Pearson remind us that nuclear weapons are still very much a threat. COVID-19 continues to plague us. As I prepare this sermon, my family is decorating the Christmas tree while I am in exile, incarcerated in my quarantine cell. In the stress, Stephanie and I have had more than one argument. *Where in the world do we find peace these days?*

I would like us to look at the artwork by South African Caiphaz Nxumalo. Nxumalo imagines an Advent scene. Let's start at the bottom. God's eye, all knowing and seeing, witnesses the sins of the people. Look at the people viewed by the eye. Are they running toward, or are they running away from, God? This

ambiguity and paradox is the ambiguity and paradox of Advent when, as I mentioned last week, we foresee the end time (when Christ will establish God's kin-dom) will be welcomed by the poor and the marginalized and feared by the rich and powerful.

For these four weeks before the birth of Jesus on Christmas, John the Baptist is the central figure of Advent. As Fleming Rutledge so eloquently states, John is the figure "standing at the edge of the universe, at the dawn of the new world, the turn of the ages. That is his location as the sentinel..." on the watchtower (Isaiah 21:8-10).² We see in Nxumalo's image, John baptizing believers in the river Jordan. He is the one saying, "We are on the cusp! We are almost there! The Chosen One is on the horizon. Repent! Repent of your sins! Be prepared for his arrival!" This is the message of Advent, when we await Christ's first coming in the Nativity *and* we await his Second Coming at the end of time.

John the Baptist preached in the prophetic tradition. John taught in the same vein as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Malachi and especially, especially, Elijah. John, just like every prophet before him - from the time of Moses, who went head to head with Pharaoh - challenged the powers and principalities of the world. John was intensely political. He was so political, he got his head cut-off. Jesus was intensely political. He was so political, he was crucified. The prophets

² Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 277.

were incredibly political. So political, they were often hunted and also killed (Matthew 23:30 and Luke 11:47). I sometimes sigh when Christians ask me as a minister not to be 'political'.

In the opening verses of today's scripture reading, John the Baptist's, and therefore Jesus', ministry, are framed within the context of politics. That's why the author of Luke states that the events happen during certain politicians' tenures: Emperor Tiberius, governor Pontius Pilate, and princes Herod and Philip. These are the figures whose ways John the Baptist and Jesus challenge.

We can see all this in Nxumalo's 'triangular frame' "alluding to the valleys being lifted and the mountains being brought down low".³ This is all about politics! Mountains are the rich, powerful, and societally privileged by sex, race, and religion. The valleys are the poor, people of color, women, immigrants, foreigners, gay-lesbian-and transgender, undereducated, and working class people. Mountains and valleys refer to people, not to geologic topography!

So, where in the world do we find peace these days? Well, after family arguments about COVID this week, I found peace in prayer. My family prayed in the midst of our troubles. Prayer reframed us. It provided us immediately with a new point of reference that pointed us to our Creator rather than to ourselves.

³ Victoria Emily Jones, "Advent, Day 7: Behold!", *Art & Theology*, December 5, 2020. Found at: <https://artandtheology.org/2020/12/05/advent-day-7-behold/>, accessed December 4, 2021.

I found peace at an Urgent Care in the consultation office of a medical doctor who sat, listened, explained, comforted, assured, and made me feel whole though I felt utterly broken.

I found peace in the scriptures that Teddy, Gabby, and Becky read for us. There is peace in the Word of God. I know it to be true. Isaiah said, “Comfort, comfort my people – it is the voice of God; speak tenderly to Jerusalem (40:1) [...] the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all humankind together shall seek it” (40:5). John the Baptist proclaimed Isaiah’s words and preached, “All humankind shall see God’s deliverance” (Luke 3:6).

I will find peace when I hear of our members under A.J. McDonald’s leadership secure Christmas trees on our front lawn, declaring to the town and world that despite these dark times our church is alive, well, and faithful.

I find peace in this worship service, where Teddy, Gabby, and their girl, Allegra, are themselves lights in our church and who light the Advent candles and proclaim the ultimate peace of our savior Jesus Christ who lives and reigns and whose love conquers even death.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, “Amen!”