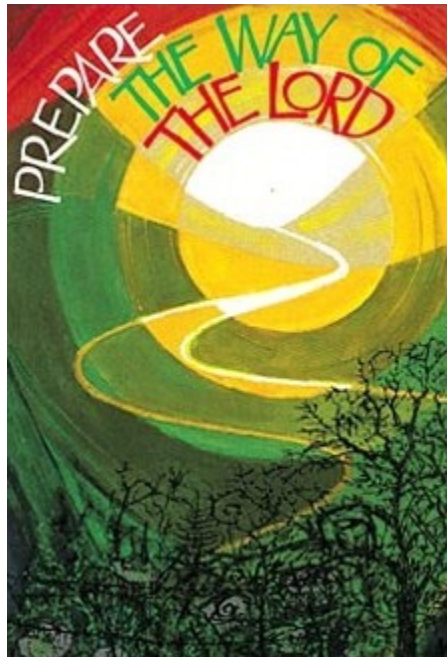


**Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
Brattleboro, Vermont  
December 10, 2023**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper  
Transcribed by A.I. and ZOOM**

**“What Can I Say to Prepare the Way?”**

**Scripture: Mark 1:1-8**



Credit: *Guerrilla Christianity*, PodBean

Please, be comfortable. Let us pray. *Loving God, we have come to listen. Give us ears to hear. We have also come to proclaim. Give us words to speak. May all that we hear, all that we say, and all that we do prepare the way. Amen.*

Friends, I have a special treat for you this Sunday morning: A guest speaker. I will conclude with an abbreviated message.

Our sermon series during Advent, as you can see from the cover of your service bulletin is “Tear Open the Heavens”. The quote is a prayer from the prophet Isaiah, begging for, pleading for, God's intervention in a context of injustice.

We here at Center Church are also focusing on our role with God to make interventions in our world, in our contemporary time, that is so full of injustice and bloodshed.

You saw during the lighting of the Advent wreath candle that we are also focusing on Peace. This morning I thought it would be best to hear this morning what is being done in our community as it regards ‘tearing open the heavens’ to make an intervention and strive for peace.

I invite to speak Django Grace, as well as Susan Healy and Lissa Weinmann. They are here on behalf of an organization called PeaceJam. I would like to take this opportunity and Advent as we light the peace handle to hear from Django about what the youth are doing in our community in regards to the establishment and the striving for peace in our world.

Django, thank you so much. For being with us, we really look forward to hearing what you have to say.

## **DJANGO**

Thank you. Thank you for having me. My name is Django Grace. I'm a senior at Brattleboro Union High School. I'm part of a group called PeaceJam. I am the President of the group. I wish to speak a little bit about how PeaceJam is formed and why it formed in the way that it did.

PeaceJam is a global organization that connects schools from all over the world. The mission of PeaceJam is to connect students with the work of Nobel Peace Prize-winners. Through that connection, PeaceJam aims to

engender a generation of people who are more willing to work on bettering our world and bring peace to our communities. I don't know if many people know about this, but after the pandemic we at Brattleboro Union High School (BUHS) actually went through a very rough period. I was a freshman during the pandemic. Coming out of the pandemic, we experienced a lot pretty extreme violence at our school, both verbally and visual. There was a lot of mistrust between faculty and students and a lot of mistrust within student body. It was a very negative environment to me. It was hard coming to school and knowing that the school is not always the most welcoming. So two years ago, as I was a sophomore, I was part of a group created to bring peace into our high school community. We did that through starting a local chapter of PeaceJam and the way we really got the ball rolling was to engage with a Nobel Peace Prize-winner who is a resident of Brattleboro. Her name is Jody Williams. She's done incredible work. She has probably saved thousands, if not like millions, of lives by ending of the use of landmines in armed conflicts around the world. She won the Nobel Peace Prize. And so we brought her back to her old school (BUHS) and she gave us a speech from 'the front line'. That was the first event that PeaceJam organized. The event really had a positive effect in the community. After, people were 'feeling it'. From there we started this group that now has on paper, 45, even 50, members. At the meetings, we get a smaller group, maybe 15, or 20 people. But we really work to bring those principles that the Peace Prize-Winners advocate into our community. We do some learning. There's a curriculum that the Windham World Affairs Council kindly bought us. Through that curriculum, we hear about some of the work that these people are doing. We then take that inspiration and bring it into our community.

A couple of the things that we've done, the first notable thing we do, is we bring in speakers to bridge the gap between high schoolers and people who are in this line of work. We've had speakers come in and talk about sustainability in our forests, the wealth divide (inequality) and how we're going to solve our economic problems. Those are the two

activities of which I can think. And then we're going to be hosting a speaker who is going to share with us about the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

Another pretty big thing that we did was recently, in the last month, we hosted a really big drive for the Women's Freedom Center. The Freedom Centre is an awesome organization in Brattleboro that helps survivors who have experienced sexual and domestic violence. We were able to raise over \$500 in cash. And then we also got a bunch of other donations. So, that's all really good.

Possibly the most notable thing we did last year was we organized a big bike drive. We wanted to take cars off the roads and put bikes in the hands of people. We're going to use them and make transportation more accessible. It's a big problem here in Brattleboro. So we are trying to breach that gap. It started off trying to get a couple of bikes here and there. The first couple of weeks of the drive, we put the word out for bikes via emails and posters. We got like six rusty bikes. Then I don't know what happened. But the next week, I checked back with our teacher organizer. This time we had, all of a sudden, we had fifty bikes. The community had really come together to bring us all these bikes. Then we started organizing, started putting the bikes in places. Then the day came and we had this awesome drive on a Sunday in May for the school. We basically just got together for a day. We fixed-up bikes. We had people coming by on Sunday. We put a lot of free bikes out there. I still keep seeing some people using them.

One notable experience we had as a guy who walked from the motel. You see him in on Putney Road. He walked all the way to Brattleboro Union High School. He came and said, "I want to find a bike that fits. I want to figure out how to get around". We picked-out the bike we realized would fit him. Then we spent three hours teaching how to ride a bike. He made his way around. He totally got it and took the bike. He

biked back to his motel. And I still see him biking around on it. It was a really warm feeling.

So we're hoping to keep the ball rolling in that sense and upscale everything that we're doing. So this year, will be doing a similar bike drive hopefully, times twelve. It's going to be a week long period of organizing the drive, bringing the bikes in, and doing repairs. And we're going to do a weekend of bike giveaways. So, keep your ears open. For the spring, we'll be hosting that big event.

The next big upcoming event that PeaceJam is doing, and something that's very important to this service, is a film screening. The Window World Affairs Council is also headlining this one. There will be a film screening on January 28, at 5:00pm at the Latches. The film is called "The Cure for Hate: Bearing Witness to Auschwitz". This is a very, very important story. The story of a man named Tony McAleer, and he was a former skinhead, Neo Nazi, and a Holocaust-denier.

The film documents how he came out of this period of hatred and learned how to repair some of the harm that he had done, take account of himself, take action, and become accountable for what he learned. So, it's his journey.

Tony ended up going to Auschwitz and seeing firsthand. The text of the holocaust journey of learning how to escape from hate and move toward peace is kind of used as a vehicle to explore from how we are going to do that as a global society. It's a very important film. And if I'm not mistaken, Tony McAleer and the filmmaker, Peter Hutchinson, will be there after the film for a discussion. It is therefore very important to come see this film. We're also screening it at the high school for the students.

If anyone is interested in attending, please see Lissa Weinmann and Susan Healy who will be selling tickets and collecting donations for the

film after service. If everyone can contribute, that would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for having me.

SCOTT COUPER

Thank you very much, Djengo. Last week, Djengo, we lit the candle of Hope. Having you here speak, and also Lissa and Susan, gives us hope. Thank you. And it was really wonderful to hear the very specific things that are being done for peace, not just locally, but also globally.

In our Scripture reading that Holly and Scott read so beautifully for us this morning, we heard how John the Baptist began his ministry. He began by quoting the prophet Isaiah with the words. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight for him".

The ministry began with words. John invited people to repent and to change their ways. He spoke. Then he baptized. Yet, that beginning actually *also* had a beginning.

If you read from the gospel according to Luke, chapter one, we are able to read earlier in the story and learn about John the Baptist's father. His name was Zachariah and he was a priest. Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth, did not believe that they would be able to have children after the angel Gabriel told them they would. Gabriel promised Zachariah that he would be mute for his doubting of what had been foretold. He would not be able to speak until the one who was to prepare the way for the Lord was born. Zachariah's wife became pregnant. Following John's birth, people asked what is going to be his name. Zachariah motioned for a tablet. Zachariah wrote down on the tablet, "His name is John". And after this, Zachariah was able to speak.

With John, in many ways, it began with words. With Zechariah, in many ways, it began with words.

Throughout history, many words have been spoken to prepare The Way.

We had a Windham World Affairs Council meeting on Wednesday. We talked about this book that I'm reading. The book is about the words "We hold these truths", which, of course,

come from the United States' Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident". That's the preamble of the Declaration. That preamble began a democratic project that still is in existence today. "We hold these truths...."

There are other words that you know prepared a way. How about "I have a dream"? Django, I don't know if you know, for my PhD in history, I wrote about the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize-winner Albert Luthuli (a Congregationalist). No one had (and no one has yet) written a substantive biography on Albert Luthuli until I did. One of the things that Albert Luthuli said was, "Let my people go". That was the title of Albert Luthuli's autobiography. Of course, he quoting Moses, when Moses was demanding to Pharaoh, "Let my people go".

Here again, we have we have words that prepared a way. Yet, not just words. "We hold these truths..." - many actions came after them. "I have a dream". Many actions came after them. "Let my people go". Many actions came after them.

This morning, I would like to really ask all of us during Advent, 'What are our words'? What are our actions that will prepare the way for justice and peace in our world?

For me personally, I wrote to my former spouse this past week and I asked, "What can we do together to cooperate to celebrate our son's,

Micah's, graduation?" It begins with words. Then hopefully, and I'm quite assured, positive actions will follow.

What are words that you have spoken that have led to an intervention for the better in your life or in others' lives? We are a just Peace Church. We celebrate the efforts of PeaceJam. We are also an Open and Affirming church. Sometimes the words: "I am queer" can be a wonderful revelatory statement. There's almost an intervention that enables others to feel comfortable and welcome in this space.

Perhaps it's "Will you marry me?" Wow! Those are incredible words that allow for an intervention that opens-up a whole new life. For some it has been, or is, or will be a statement, "I am an alcoholic" and that leads to an intervention. It leads to a whole life of truth, peace, and restoration. Very simple words can change our life and many others' lives. We know that as we host AA and NA in our church.

Perhaps for you, the words to establish peace in your life and in the world may simply be to someone to say, "I am sorry". "I am sorry" can defuse a whole conflict and open-up a chance of reconciliation and peace.

Recently, I worked with Action Corps. At its request, I wrote an article about the war in the Holy Land. Perhaps it is a collection of voices saying the words "free the hostages" and "ceasefire" that can bring sanity to our world.

This morning, I just want you to pause and think about what words can enable you to prepare The Way either in your own lives, in Brattleboro, or in the world. They don't have to be as lofty as "Let my people go" or "I have a dream". They can be as simple as "I'm sorry" and "Can we work together?"



I'm thankful to Priscilla for leading us as a church through the Advent devotional entitled *All I Really Want* (Quinn Caldwell, 2014). December 5<sup>th</sup>'s morning message really inspired this message and for me to invite Django, Lissa, and Susan here.

The devotion confided what words prepared The Way for Zechariah: “His name is John’. For Mary, it was, ‘I'm pregnant’. If you haven't said your words yet. What are you waiting for?” (p. 27)

This is the Word of God. And it was preached to all of you, the people of God. And the people of God responded, “Amen”.