

“The Audacity of Peace,” based on Luke 3:1-6
A sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett
at The Larchmont Avenue Church
December 9, 2018

I.

Do any of you remember the story of Batkid?

The story of Batkid first made the news about 5 years ago, and it turns out that Jonah’s father, my father-in-law, David Bartlett, shared the story of Batkid with the congregation he was serving on a Sunday when it was still fresh in the headlines.

At the time of David’s sermon, Batkid was a 5 year old boy named Miles Scott from the San Francisco Bay area. And Miles had leukemia that had recently moved into remission.

This is more or less David’s version of the story:

The Make-a-Wish Foundation asked Miles what his wish was, and his wish was to be Batman for a day. But, since he was only 5 years old, what he really wanted was to be Batkid for a day. Word got out on social media and 13,000 folks from San Francisco answered the call and came together to make Miles’ wish a reality. On the designated day, there was a Batmobile, and a Bat-costume, and a senior Batman to attend to the junior Batkid. For that day San Francisco became Gotham City; the mayor made a proclamation and the San Francisco Chronicle ran a special edition Gotham City Chronicle newspaper. The forces of evil were banished--the Penguin and the Riddler were sent packing.

After sharing the story of Batkid, David went on to say:

Did San Francisco really disappear and become Gotham City? Not exactly.
Was evil banished along with the Riddler? Well, not entirely.
Was Miles’ leukemia conquered forever? We don’t know.

But for a few hours another reality pushed against the mundane reality of the city on the bay. For a few hours a different vision of life enriched and revised the vision of life as usual. ...Listen beloved: Sometimes what’s real isn’t just what we usually see and certainly not what we can usually measure.

Sometimes what's most real is what we dream toward, and what we work toward, and what we pray toward."¹

II.

In our reading this morning, Luke makes quite the effort to root us in the seen-and-measured reality of the day. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee..." and so on and so forth. And we might be very inclined to skip ahead to get to the action of the text, because let's be honest, this feels a little tedious and not really the part that's worth our attention.

But context matters, and this context matters especially. These seven men are very important people of the day, politically and religiously. They represent the Roman Empire and its power, wealth, influence and control over, well, everything. Even the Jewish religious leaders, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, were under Rome's thumb, enjoying a tenuous peace at best so long as they knew their place and did not disturb the mandated order of things.

Seven very important people in positions of power are listed by Luke, and yet God's Word does not come to any of them. God's Word wanders out to the wilderness to hang out with John the Baptist.

There are two realities at play here, and they are pushing against one another. There's the mundane, experienced reality of the Empire and the prophetic vision of a coming reality that John proclaims in the wilderness, a reality that borrows poetic imagery from Isaiah, a reality where "every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

III.

In this season of Advent, we join our sisters and brothers around the country and around the world in marking time by the lighting of the Advent candles. Each candle typically represents a word to help guide us in our preparations to welcome Jesus into our hearts and into our lives once again.

¹ Rev. Dr. David L. Bartlett, *Really?* A sermon preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA) on Nov. 17, 2013.
https://www.trinityatlanta.org/tools/files/players/audio/?src=%2Ffiles%2F5013%2F8619%2F2137%2Fsermon_11_17.mp3

On this second Sunday of Advent, with the help of the Gedney family, we lit the candle of peace. And as many of you know, the Hebrew word for peace is shalom. Shalom is more than the absence of violence or the threat of violence, large or small, collective or individual. It is more than the presence of quiet and tranquility. The biblical concept of shalom expands the definition to include not only peace, but also the sense of restoration and wholeness in our individual lives, our community and our world. It is a deep sense of peace, of healing, of wholeness for all of God's creation that exists in God's kingdom. This is shalom.

On this second Sunday of Advent here at LAC, we light the candle of peace, but at my former church down the road in Scarsdale, on the second Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of promise. They are the only congregation that I know of that includes "promise" in the Advent candle lineup, and I like it. Here's why: the Advent peace to which we point is always the promise of shalom. It is the promise proclaimed by the prophets across the centuries, the promise that God is still at work and is not done with us yet. It is an audacious peace and an audacious promise.

And it has to be, because this peace can get lost so easily in the midst of all of those valleys in need of filling and all those mountains in need of toppling and all those rough ways in need of smoothing. This promise can get lost so easily when all we can see is the empire that in many ways creates and keeps these obstacles in place. This shalom can get lost so easily when we are filled, as many of us are at this time of year, with feelings of anxiety and grief and despair, feelings that can overwhelm and immobilize us.

IV.

But the good news of the gospel is that this promised peace, this shalom, this restoration and wholeness is coming. And God's inbreaking into the world at the birth of Christ is powerful enough to overcome any obstacle that might stand in the way. That is the audacity of Advent peace, of God's peace, of kingdom peace.

God's shalom is coming, and in this season, we are invited to turn towards it...to joyfully redirect our hearts and our lives so that they point to God's kingdom, God's reality, that is already here and still on the way.

V.

A couple of weeks ago, one of David Bartlett's former students, Rev. Drew Stockstill, sent us a sermon that he (Drew) had just preached, based on David's sermon from five years ago. And it turns out that five years later, Batkid is on his way to becoming Bat-teen

and is once again in the headlines, because five years after saving San Francisco, Batkid's cancer is gone.²

Does this mean that every valley has been filled for all of God's children? Sadly no, and not even close. But it does show us that they can be filled, and beckons us to pay attention to where they are being filled, and encourages us to roll up our sleeves to participate in this vision of wholeness and restoration.

"Listen beloved: Sometimes what's real isn't just what we usually see and certainly not what we can usually measure. Sometimes what's most real is what we dream toward, and what we work toward, and what we pray toward."³

This is the audacity of Advent peace, of God's peace, of kingdom peace.

Prepare ye the way. Amen.

² "Batkid won our hearts. Now he's cancer-free.", in the Washington Post Nov. 15, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2018/11/15/batkid-won-our-hearts-now-hes-got-something-much-better-hes-cancer-free/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.de3feb442c54

³ Rev. Dr. David L. Bartlett, *Really? A sermon preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA) on Nov. 17, 2013.*
https://www.trinityatlanta.org/tools/files/players/audio/?src=%2Ffiles%2F5013%2F8619%2F2137%2Fsermon_11_17.mp3