



## “Straight Up Peace in a Broken-Down World”

**Theme: Advent – Peace by Piece**

**Scriptures: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 and Mark 1:1-8**

**Weekly Memory Verse:** *<sup>8</sup>I listen carefully to what God the Lord is saying, for he speaks peace to his faithful people.* –Psalm 85:8

**Family Activity for the Week:** We don’t yet have snow covering the ground in Durango, but when you look up to the mountains, you can see it glistening at the peaks. Each snowflake that falls is unique, different from the last. Look around, do you know two people who are identical in mind, body, and spirit? Each one of us was knit together in our mother’s womb, created in His image, and dearly loved. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” There is peace in knowing that God is faithful. That He knows you intimately and that there is only one you. You bring special qualities to each job, relationship, task, all the work that God prepared for you. Take time to make some paper snowflakes today and reflect on God’s goodness in you!

**Monday, December 7** – Read Isaiah 40:3-5. Most ancient roads were more like unpaved country roads than like our modern highways, full of bumps and hills. When a king was going somewhere, work parties would often level the highest and lowest spots on the road he would travel. Isaiah used that custom to portray the work of the forerunner God would send to spiritually prepare people for God’s anointed one, the Messiah.

- ▲ After an ugly vision of pagan worship right in the Temple in Jerusalem, we read in Ezekiel 11:23 how the prophet saw a haunting image of God’s presence sadly moving out of the Temple and city. As the exile ended, the prophetic message was that God intends to return to the city. The second paragraph describes what we might depict as a voice commissioning a freeway contractor to carve out a highway to take God back. Even when we’ve pushed God aside, God never gives up on us. How does God’s never-giving-up love speak to your heart?
- ▲ John the Baptist fulfilled Isaiah’s words as Jesus’ forerunner. Yet John and Jesus were poor peasants, in no way part of Israel’s elite. How did Isaiah’s image of a king coming to town, of God returning to the center of Israel’s life, help people in Jesus’ day (as well as us) to grasp Jesus’ identity as ruler of all creation?

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**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, life itself may create some bumps in your road to my heart. But it saddens me to recognize the barriers my stubbornness or blindness put up. Guide me to smooth your way into my life as much as possible. Amen.

**Tuesday, December 8** – Read Mark 1:1-8. Baptizing with water was not novel in John’s day. Some pagan cults used a form of it. Jews expected it of Gentiles joining the covenant people. But baptizing Jewish people to establish or restore a relationship with God was so different that it attracted a lot of attention. John’s call for a one-time baptism for those who had been born as Jews was unprecedented in the time of Jesus.

- ▲ In verse 4, the phrase, “Changing their hearts and lives,” translates a form of the single Greek word *metanoia*. The word is often translated as, “repenting,” but *metanoia* does not simply mean, “to be sorry about,” or, “to regret.” It also involves a change of both attitude (or heart) and of conduct. In what ways has a change of attitude or heart showed itself in changed conduct in your life?
- ▲ Mark’s gospel, the shortest of the four, had a sense of urgency. Scholar/pastor Eugene Peterson noted, “There’s an air of breathless excitement in nearly every sentence he writes. The sooner we get the message, the better off we’ll be, for the message is good, incredibly good: God is here, and he’s on our side.” Can you recall a time when the message of God’s love and forgiveness excited you, and you urgently wanted to share it?

**Prayer:** Lord, I wonder if I would have gone to hear John? Would I have chosen to confess my sins and seek baptism? Remind me of my baptism or move me to seek baptism now. Amen.

**Wednesday, December 9** – Read Matthew 3:1-6. 200-400 years had gone by with no clear prophetic voice in Israel. Then, out of the harsh, bleak desert of Judea (where the people who created the famous Dead Sea Scrolls also lived) came John the Baptist forcefully and urgently calling people to change their lives. He drew crowds hungry for a word from God. Despite his visible impact for good, he pointed beyond his own ministry to herald the Messiah’s nearness.

- ▲ We saw yesterday that John’s call for even ethnic Hebrews to accept baptism as a sign of repentance was strikingly different from most religious teaching. Matthew wrote that, “as they confessed their sins, he baptized them.” What role, if any, does confession play in your relationship with God? If God already knows where you have failed, for whose benefit is confession important?
- ▲ Matthew gave a very concise summary of John’s preaching in verse 2. What were the key elements of the message? What was there about that kind of message that would draw many people from the relative comfort of Jerusalem into the wilderness to listen and then request baptism? In what ways do we need to hear John’s message this Advent season?

**Prayer:** Lord God, John called people then to become citizens of “the kingdom of heaven.” His call still echoes today. Begin or enhance the life of that kingdom in my heart and life. Amen.

**Thursday, December 10** – Read Matthew 3:7-12. Matthew’s gospel gave a longer version of John’s preaching than Mark’s. Besides the basic message that the “kingdom of heaven” (which most people expected the Messiah to set up) was coming, Matthew recorded John’s warnings to people unwilling to change their hearts and lives. Scholar David Dockery wrote of John’s preaching, “He insisted that one’s ancestry was not adequate to guarantee one’s relationship with God. That new commitment was solemnized in baptism.”

- ▲ John said the coming one would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Scholar William Barclay noted that when we ask what that means, “we must remember to answer it in Hebrew terms. John was a Jew, and it was to Jews that he was speaking.” John traced in detail how Hebrews understood God’s Spirit. It brought life, power, new creation, God’s truth, and the ability to understand that truth. How did

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those ideas set the foundation for the Christian trust in the Holy Spirit? Which of those gifts do you most value?

- ▲ In verses 9-10, John bluntly challenged those who thought their ethnic or religious heritage alone could keep them close to God. Have you ever known (or been) someone who hoped that family tradition or church affiliation could take the place of a living, life-changing personal connection with God? Do religious as well as spiritually questioning people need to hear and heed John's call to repent?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I open my heart to your baptism of me with the Holy Spirit. Create in me a new life of power, truth, and a willingness to understand what you are teaching me. Amen.*

**Friday, December 11** – Read Luke 3:1-14. Luke's gospel added more depth about John's message. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke said John baptized people as a symbol of cleansing and change. But he added two elements not in the other gospels. In verses 1-2, he carefully anchored the time of John's mission to the reign of a variety of human leaders, vividly conveying that, "This really happened." He also showed John answering questions from various people about how, in practical day-to-day actions, they should respond to his call to change their hearts and lives.

- ▲ Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, "John was... preparing a pathway for the Lord himself to return to his people. This was the time. Rescue was at hand." How did John's specific, practical counsel in verses 11, 13 and 14 prepare a pathway for the Lord to reshape the lives of tax collectors, soldiers and "the crowd"? In what way(s) is the Lord calling on you to reshape your life this Advent?
- ▲ Luke named no less than seven well-known people who held various offices as John the Baptist preached. Today we might say he preached in "1968" or "1847," but few people in Luke's day would have been able to reckon time in those ways. Why do you think Luke worked to so clearly anchor John's (and Jesus') ministry in history? In 2 Peter 1:16, the apostle wrote of the Christian message, "We didn't repeat crafty myths." How important is it to you that Jesus' story (including that of his forerunner) was not "crafty myths"?

**Prayer:** *Lord God, I probably have more than two shirts, and likely enough food, too. Help me find practical ways (maybe the Christmas Eve offering?) to share with those who have none. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 12** – Read Psalm 85. Psalm 85 is known as a prayer of forgiveness. It was also used in worship as a community petition that God would be merciful as in the past. The effects of divine forgiveness on land and people are expressed in memorable metaphors and personifications.

- ▲ Which image do you find most meaningful in verses 10-15? Why?
- ▲ Our memory verse for this week is verse 8. Peace is equated with wholeness and salvation which require forgiveness. Have you ever been forgiven and felt a sense of relief, or peace? That's the idea behind this Psalm. Is there something you need to be forgiven for that is keeping you from experiencing Peace? Can you offer that to God in prayer and receive God's forgiveness today?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you are the Prince of Peace. Today, please forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_. I offer forgiveness in my heart to \_\_\_\_\_. Help me to receive the gift of peace as you offer me forgiveness for my broken places. Thank you for that gift. Amen.*