

December 5, 2021 (Advent II) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Habakkuk 2:1-3](#); [Isaiah 54:10](#)

TITLE: **Advent Peace: Written So All Can See**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The story goes that when the Declaration of Independence was completed in 1776, the president of the Continental Congress, John Hancock of Massachusetts, signed it first with a large flourish. He then said, “There! His Majesty can now read my name without spectacles. And he can double the reward on my head.” That signature has gone down in history as an example of unafraid public testimony—of putting what you believe front and center for all to see. It’s reminiscent of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.”

Hancock’s signature, along with the others on the Declaration of Independence, was a bold act visible and disruptive to many. Martin Luther’s nailing of his 95 Theses onto the cathedral door in Wittenberg was a similar public, disruptive act. The Civil Rights era march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis, became a bloody confrontation with state troopers and was a public, disruptive act writ large so all might see. If you want things to change, then that which is important has to be publicly acknowledged, even proclaimed, in ways that everyone can see.

We know almost nothing about the prophet Habakkuk. He lived about the same time as the prophet Jeremiah when the kingdom of Judah was being threatened by the invading army of the Babylonians. The first words recorded in the book of Habakkuk are a lament: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?* His words are not just a complaint, an accusation or grievance. They are a lament, which are words from the heart directed to our God who hears. Every lament, even the most angry and virulent one, rests upon a foundation of faith. Habakkuk expected an answer from God. In fact, it says he went up the city watch tower, stationed himself on the rampart on the top of the wall, keeping watch and waiting for the Lord’s answer. And an answer did come—an answer about patience and steadfast love and peace. But what I want us to focus on is that Habakkuk was told to write that answer big—to make it plain and visible so that a runner passing by might read it. Write it big so that all can see.

In addition to the prophet Habakkuk, we heard today from John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness about valleys that shall be lifted up, mountains that shall be made low, and the crooked made straight so that all people may see the salvation of God. And we heard from the prophet Isaiah about a time when mountains and hills will pass away, but God’s steadfast love—God’s covenant of peace will not be removed. Big words—big answers—worthy of being writ large so all can see. But writing what we believe in large letters always comes at a cost.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence were guilty of crimes against the crown of England—crimes of treason and sedition. As such, their property, they and their families would be targeted by the British forces. The marchers on the Pettus Bridge in

Selma paid a heavy toll for their public witness for civil rights, with some losing their lives on that Bloody Sunday. To speak up for justice—to write large what we believe is God’s will for this world—is not easy.

Take for example the theme of today’s service—peace. Peace is everywhere this Christmas season—on store banners and the cards we mail to one another: *Peace on earth, good will to all*. But peace is much more than just the absence of war. True peace comes when war stops being an option. Peace requires us to be vulnerable, not belligerent or vengeful, because it means we take on others’ pain and suffering and then move together to stop it. It means changing how we do things now, especially when the status quo is unjust, militaristic, unpeaceful. And it means saying things that are wise even when the world thinks they are foolish; writing things large enough for a runner to see it clearly on the road or for King George to read it without spectacles, even if writing such things is revolutionary.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is an African American professor of earth sciences. She also happens to be a strong advocate for abolishing prisons. Several years ago she was at a conference on environmental justice when some student participants got word to her that they wanted to talk to her. The youth were primarily Latino, many of them sons and daughters of farm workers, and most were middle-schoolers—old enough to have strong opinions and distrust adults. They couldn’t believe Gilmore wanted to close prisons. They asked her, “What about the people who do something seriously wrong? What about people who hurt or kill other people?” Gilmore knew that these kids had seen the harshness of the world and weren’t going to be easily persuaded.

She said, “Look, I get where you’re coming from. But how about this: Instead of talking about who is locked up and who goes free, why don’t we ask why we think we can solve problems by repeating the behavior that brought us the problem in the first place?” She asked them to consider why we, as a society, choose to believe cruelty and vengeance are the right answers. She told them that in Spain the average time served for murdering someone was seven years. The kids responded in disbelief at such a short sentence, but Gilmore went on. She said in Spain they decided life has enough value that they are not going to behave in a punitive and life-annihilating way toward anyone, even those who hurt others. This criminal justice approach conveys the message that where life is precious, then all life *is* precious. The kids were a tough sell and told her they’d think about it, but Gilmore felt defeated.

At the end of the day, the kids made a presentation to the conference announcing that in their workshop they’d decided that the three environmental hazards most affecting their lives were pesticides, police and prisons. Gilmore was amazed yet heartened that they’d seen the link between humanity and the ways we treat both the environment and one another. They’d taken to heart what she’d said: Where individual life is valued, treated justly, respectfully, in a word—precious, then all life is peace-filled, sustainable, in a word—precious.¹

There's so much more that can be said on this topic: how it is simply not clear that prisons truly deter crime or increase public safety. How prisons are not inevitable but reflect a choice we consciously make and an expensive bill we are all forced to pay. How 10.3 million people a year, many accused of nonviolent offenses, churn through our local jails every year. How most people age out of being a high risk for crime by the time they are in their 30s, but long punitive sentences actually increase the risk of reoffending because they so severely disrupt family ties, employment and housing.² This isn't a controversy that can be solved by statistics. But perhaps it is one where we Christians are willing to speak a different truth to a hurting world, a gospel truth, a word of peace writ large so all may see it: *When life is precious, life is precious.*

The former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once said: *The deepest enemy to peace is always the spirit of grasping and clinging to what makes us feel safe while the truth is that we shall only be safe when others are not frightened of us, when others do not feel silenced, despised or suffocated by us.*

Habakkuk stood on a rampart wall of a city besieged and troubled. His lament to the Lord was heard. And God told him to write the answer large so that all may see it. God says the same message to us. Speak up in a way that is clear and unequivocal. Challenge the dominant views wherever such views diminish or demean. Life is too precious for us to be crueler in our punishments than the crimes we seek to prevent. Life is too short for us to settle for anything less than a covenant of peace with God and with one another—and to write that covenant big, boldly, disruptively, so all can see it. This Advent season ask: What do you believe in—and what would you write big enough that all the world might see it?

Finally, just before this sermon, we sang the old carol, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." The text was written by a Massachusetts clergyman, Edmund Sears. It was composed in 1847, during the tumultuous time of the American industrial revolution and the rancor of the pre-Civil War years. The last verse we sang went like this: *For lo! The days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old, when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold—when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.* A time foretold of peace o'er all the earth. That is an answer we've long awaited. That's something worth writing big, whatever the cost, so that all may see and receive this good news.

AMEN

¹ Rachel Kushner, "Is Prison Necessary?" *New York Times Magazine*, April 21, 2019, pp. 38ff.

² Emily Bazelon and Jennifer Medina, "The Lightning Rod," *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 2021, pp. 22ff.