

## LIVING IN PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

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One of the things that make my extended family somewhat unique is that both of my parents were 1 of 12 siblings. My father grew up in rural South Carolina and was one of twelve boys. My mother grew up in Chicago and was also one of eight boys and four girls.

In some families you may find that one particular family member will be labeled as the “black sheep”. In my mother’s family that was my uncle Bob. There is very little I know about uncle Bob. I know he was born and raised in Chicago. I have never met his wife. I do not know the names of his children (my cousins). I don’t know if he has grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

I wouldn’t be able to recognize Uncle Bob if I met him on the street. The only time I saw Uncle Bob was back in the early 70’s when he made a surprise appearance at my grandmother’s funeral. He was a no-show, however, two years later when my grandfather passed away.

Something happened long ago to cause a separation between Uncle Bob and the rest of the family. Nobody really talks about it. But whatever it was, it created a deep relational chasm between him and the rest of the family. The word to describe this is *estrangement*.

The word *estrange* means literally “*to treat as a stranger*”. It describes what occurs when family members or friends become distanced or cut-off from each other. Certain words, actions, or events cause two or more people who were once in a relationship to become disconnected and strangers to each other.

20<sup>TH</sup> Century theologian Paul Tillich uses the word “estrangement” to describe the state of human existence. He argues that human experience estrangement in three ways:

1. We are estranged from God;
2. We are estranged from other beings; and
3. We are estranged from ourselves.

Tillich states that although “estrangement is not a biblical term...it is “implied in most of the biblical descriptions of man’s predicament.” It is implied in the symbols of the expulsion from paradise, in the hostility between man and nature, in the deadly hostility of brother against brother, in the estrangement of nation from nation through the confusion of language, and in the continuous complaints of the prophets against their kings and people who turn to alien Gods. [Systematic Theology, Volume Two, p. 46-47]

Tillich argues that it is not God’s intent that we live in estrangement. He defines *sin* as “the personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs.” He defines *salvation* as the act of “reuniting that which is estranged...overcoming the split between God and

man, man and his world, man and himself. (p. 116). He defines **love** as the opposite of estrangement, for love seeks reunion of that which is separated: "In faith and love, sin is conquered because estrangement is overcome by reunion."

Estrangement is not just an experience that occurs between two human beings, it can also occur between nations, tribes and people of different races and ethnic backgrounds.

Our Advent lessons for today provide us with readings which collectively offer a vision of a day when God's salvation will come to overcome our human experience of estrangement and we will be reconciled with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

The passage from the first chapter of Luke contains what is called the Song of Zechariah. The first part of this song (verses 68-75) celebrates how God has come to set his people free from estrangement by raising up a mighty Savior, born of the house of David. Though the people of Israel have turned their back on their relationship with God, God promises to maintain the promises he made in the covenant of Abraham. The covenant was a statement of relationship: "I will be your God and you will be my people". It is a covenant to which God has always been faithful, though we have broken that covenant many times throughout history.

The second part of the song celebrates not only God's saving acts, but also promises God will send someone before the savior to "prepare the way" and alert God's people that God's salvation is at hand.

The passage from the third chapter of Luke places the beginning of these promised acts of reconciliation in God in a specific time and place:

- In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; when Herod was ruler of Galilee; when Herod's brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachinitis; when Lysanias was ruler of Abilene; when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests.
- In the wilderness – to a man named John, son of Zechariah. The word of God comes to John and he begins to proclaim a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is not by accident that the words of God proclaim the acts of God that make it possible to overcome man's estrangement from God, from others, and from himself comes to a man living in a place of estrangement. In the wilderness you are alone. In the wilderness it is as if you are alienated from all things that give life.

When the word comes to John in the wilderness and he begins to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, that message is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. The prophet states that one day there will be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, saying "Prepare the way of the Lord." In other words, the Lord is coming! And at the very end of the prophecy, we read these words: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All living creatures will know that God has acted to bring

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about reconciliation and peace, overcoming human sin which causes us to be alienated from and stranger to God, to others and to ourselves.

Dear brothers and sisters gathered in the name of Jesus who is the Christ. Christmas is the celebration of God's salvation coming to us in human form in the one we know as Jesus. Through Jesus God makes known God's love for us and desire for us to be in relationship with God, with each other and with ourselves. Advent is the time when we remind ourselves of how painful it is to live lives of estrangement. Advent is a time to help clear away those barriers that prevent life-giving relationships. Advent is a time to open our heart, mind, and spirit to God's reconciling love. Advent is a time of hope and peace. Amen.