

Dare to Imagine: God's Embrace (Peace)

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church,

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[SLIDE 1]

We are being invited this morning to “Dare to Imagine God’s Embrace!” And so, I want to begin by inviting us to put our imaginations to use for a few minutes. [SLIDE 2]

- Close your eyes and consider, what image or images come to mind when you think of the word embrace? Take a moment. Ok. Now open your eyes. Responses from in-person and online?:
 - Hug/Being held –Like the theme picture
 - A child’s embrace, maybe?
 - Intimate partner
 - Safety/Peace/Well-being → appropriate on this Sunday of Advent
 - A person’s embrace – specific
 - Someone drawing near
 - Problematic due to COVID

These are all good examples and, to be honest, [many of] these are the examples I expected! The word “embrace” carries, for many of us, a meaning and a sense that I suspect is for the most part positive, conveying emotions and attitudes like love, affection, and acceptance. When we think of embracing or being embraced by a loved one, we think of the intimacy of relationship, of being “brought near to someone’s heart.” This is not surprising given some of the other meanings of embrace such as: encircle, surround, or enclose. There is in these other words that sense again of being held.

But more positive understandings of the word embrace are perhaps complicated when we begin to think about the real-life context in which we experience an embrace. [As has already been mentioned] the word “embrace” might also make us think of how complicated any form of intimate encounter is right now because of the global pandemic. “Can I hug you?” is a question that we might now have to pose to loved ones with a frequency that was not nearly so common

two years ago. More than ever, you can find research and articles online by social scientists, doctors, and psychologists detailing the importance of “hugs,” “touch,” or forms of “embrace” for physical and mental well-being.¹ During the pandemic, when many of us have been deprived of forms of close physical connection, we have begun to realize the toll their absence takes on us. And, sadly, there have also been many heart-breaking stories of families that could not embrace their loved ones in their final moments due to risk of further spreading the virus. If there is ever a time when we might think of needing embrace, it is when we have to say goodbye to a loved one, or when we are living in a time of deep, personal need—where we have been forced to come to terms with our own limitations.

The happy image of embrace is also complicated by the fact that not everyone desires the same level of affectionate embrace or touch, and indeed, for some the very thought of an embrace may bring up feelings of *discomfort*. There is a time and a place for physical embrace and there are times when such an embrace is not appropriate. For an embrace among people to really be appropriate, healthy, and comforting, it matters who is embracing and who is being embraced; it matters if the embrace is invited or not; and, of course, it matters that the embrace happens in a relationship of mutual trust, of shared power, and of care and love. Maybe the word “embrace” is a bit more complicated than we might think at first blush.

There is yet another sense of the word “embrace” worth reflecting on. We often hear the word embrace used in the sense of “acceptance” or “support.” And so, perhaps you might hear someone say of BMC: “We are always learning to embrace new ways of worshipping God together” or “we have been learning to embrace change.” To embrace, in this active, verbal sense, can mean to accept something or someone that we did not, at least initially, support,

¹ See for example:
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_pandemic_gave_us_a_lesson_on_the_importance_of_hugs

expect, recognize, or value as we should have. Or, speaking passively, we can say that being embraced in this sense can mean to be accepted, recognized, and valued in a way that we had not been previously. And so, we might hear someone say, “I really appreciate the way that BMC has embraced the use of my gifts in worship.” Embrace in this sense takes on a meaning that has really important implications for ethics and matters of justice in community. *Who* does our community embrace and who do we exclude, either intentionally or otherwise? Which ways of life do we embrace, and which do we turn away from?

I wonder, then, how our initial impressions of the word embrace might change if we begin to talk about and imagine **God’s** embrace? [SLIDE 3] Let’s put our imaginations to work again. Take a moment, close your eyes and consider, what image or images come to mind when you think of God’s embrace? Take a moment. Ok. Now open your eyes. Responses?:

- Safety
- Love
- Acceptance
- Challenge? Provocation?

[These are all helpful responses] I hope that exercising our imagination in this way will help us this morning, as we face our collective challenge to Dare to let our imaginations about “God’s embrace” be shaped by the scripture readings for today. This morning we ask, “In what ways do these advent scriptures help us understanding God’s embrace? Do these scripture passages line up with our imaginations? Do they challenge our imaginations?” Let’s look in a bit more depth at our scriptures for today and see what happens to our imaginations along the way.

The first scripture reading for today comes from the prophet Malachi. [SLIDE 4] Malachi was a messenger of God² who, like most of the prophets, had some harsh things to say to Israel

² Malachi’s name literally means “my messenger.”

and especially to the Priests leading Israel. The priests had an important role in Israel: they were to be an example to Israel of people who feared God, taught the truth, and walked in peace and uprightness. They also led Israel's sacrificial worship rituals. Malachi focuses a good amount of time in chapters 1 and 2 calling out Israel's priests, claiming that they have despised the name of God (1:6) through the abandonment of the law in their worship (1:8), through failing to teach Israel the law and the moral imperatives that God had given (2:6), and through the perversion of justice in the community (2:9). Malachi claimed, however, that this priestly corruption would be dealt with by God coming to the temple, and this is what we heard about in our scripture reading from Malachi 3 today. First Malachi mentions the arrival of a messenger who would "clear the way" before God, so that God could "enter" the temple and purify the priests with a refiner's fire (3:3) and so through them purify the worship of Israel.³

Now that we have a bit of context to Malachi's prophetic ministry, let's ask ourselves, "how can our imagination about 'God's embrace' be shaped by a prophetic message like this?" To help us with this question, why don't we try this: what if we read Malachi's words again but this time let's throw the word "embrace" in their occasionally. Listen to what his words could sound like: [SLIDE 5]

Malachi 3:1-3 ^{RS} See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly [embrace] his temple... ² But who can endure the day of [that embrace], and who can stand when [so embraced]? For [that embrace] is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ [God] will enclose and surround you as a refiner and purifier of silver, and [God] will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

Woah! Some embrace. Here we have an image of embrace that has an edge to it! God comes to the temple, encloses, and surrounds it and by doing so does not leave it as it was before. This embrace effects change, and it will likely be a change that is experienced as both a life-giving

³ Here some of you might be hearing Handel's Messiah orchestral oratio "And he shall purify the Sons of Levi."

and also a painful experience. Malachi presents us with an image of God's embrace as like a refiner's fire that purifies, renews, and restores.

I wonder how Malachi's image of "God's embrace" as the embrace of a refiner's fire might relate to us in our common life and in our worship here at BMC. Our worship is not, of course, governed around Israel's sacrificial system with a temple and Priests leading the sacrificial worship as in Malachi's day. As Mennonites, we tend to place a strong emphasis on the congregational sacrifice or the sacrifice of discipleship, if you will. We talk about our bodies as being both the "temple of the holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:16) and the living sacrifice offered to God (Romans 12). We also place no small emphasis on each one of us being priests. With the phrase "Priesthood of all believers," we try to emphasize the way that we are all called to mutually glorify the name of God, teach each other and model for each other what it means to follow Jesus in life, and seek God's justice and peace in community. So, given our identity, what does Malachi's message of a coming refiner and purifier mean for us, the Priesthood of All Believers? How might God's embrace this Advent season come to us as a challenge, a challenge to be open to the arrival of the God whose presence purifies and refines us so that our daily lives can be offered to God and to others as a pleasing sacrifice? As we dare to imagine God's refining and purifying embrace, why don't we try this prayer together: [SLIDE 6]

[TOGETHER]: God, your embrace refines and purifies. Help us to be open to your arrival in the temple of our world and the temple of our bodies. Embrace us in our need as feeble creatures and refine us into a people of justice.

What about our second scripture reading for today? What can it teach us about God's embrace? Luke chapter 1 draws us into a setting not dissimilar to the setting Malachi spoke in. At the beginning of Luke 1 we are again at the temple. And again, we are in the presence of the priesthood, this time with a particular priest named "Zechariah." [SLIDE 7] We are told that

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were “righteous,” “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” (1:6) While Malachi spoke in a time where Israel’s priests were leading the people of Israel off-course and dishonoring God, Luke depicts Zechariah and Elizabeth as a priestly couple that are fit to lead the people of Israel to a righteous life. This is not to say that in their time there were no problems with the priesthood or with Israel as a whole. Luke makes it clear that Israel still needed to continue hearing the prophetic call to repentance and righteous living in preparation of the coming Lord. Earlier in Luke 1, Zechariah had been in the temple and had been told by a messenger of God that he and Elizabeth would have a Son who was to be named John and who would “turn...the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous” and “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17). Zechariah and Elizabeth, already leading Israel by righteous example, will now have a son who will take up the divine mission of calling those who were still wayward in Israel to righteous life in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

By now this talk of a messenger who will prepare the way of the Lord to come to his people should be sounding familiar. Luke is wanting us to hear the echo of Malachi’s prophetic word in his own account of John the Baptist’s birth. Luke is saying: Remember Malachi’s and Isaiah’s prophecy about the messenger of the Lord? Well, the messenger of the Lord is now here, ready to clear the way for the Lord whose embrace will purify and refine Israel. But Luke’s whirlwind first chapter also gives us a picture of an Israel whose need extends beyond internal purification. Israel was expecting the coming of the Lord not only as the one to refine and purify, but also as the one to deliver them from the hands of their enemies and bring true peace. The birth of John the Baptist occurred in a time when Israel was under Roman imperial domination and living under imperial rule always brings with it the fear of that imperial rule and the death it

could deal out at a moment's notice. Israel, in other words, dwelled not in safety but in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Eight days after John's birth, however, Zechariah speaks a prophecy in which he declared that the messenger that prophets had spoken of had come in his son John. John would "prepare the people of Israel" for the purifying and refining presence of the Lord, yes, but also for the Lord whose presence would bring "tender mercy," and "light" for those in darkness, and "guidance" for those looking to live in peace. Now how can our imagination about "God's embrace" be shaped by a prophecy like Zechariah's!? What if we read the passage from Luke 1 through the lens of God's embrace? Listen to what it would sound like: [SLIDE 8]

Luke 1:68-79 ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare the [people for his embrace], ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender [embrace] of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to [hold close] those who have been abandoned and left in death's shadow, to help us [embrace] the life of peace."

Zechariah presents us with an image of God's embrace as forgiveness and tender acceptance, an embrace that delivers and protects, an embrace that brings light and life for those living in the shadow of darkness and death. I wonder how Zechariah's image of "God's embrace" might relate to us in our common life here at BMC. Certainly, many of us, regardless of how privileged we are (and let's make no mistake, we are very privileged), many of us still know something of what it means to be "sitting in darkness," and living beneath "the shadow of death." We have lived in the shadow of health crises, of the death of friends and loved ones, of mental health challenges, and of uncertain futures. This global pandemic has heightened our awareness of the darkness in our world: beyond the darkness wrought by the virus itself, the pandemic has unveiled in greater measure the evils of inequality, oppression, climate disaster, and human violence that plague us at both a personal and at a communal level. How might God's

embrace this Advent season come to us and indeed the world around us as hope for deliverance from these evils? As forgiveness of the evil within and tender acceptance? And importantly, as a light to guide us in the path of peace? As we dare to imagine God's forgiving, tender, and protective embrace, why don't we try this prayer together: [SLIDE 9]

[TOGETHER]: God, your embrace is forgiveness and tenderness. Save us from the darkness within ourselves and from the evils of darkness and oppression in the world. Help us to be open to your arrival as our unexpected deliverer. Embrace us in our need as feeble creatures and show us the path of peace.

The prophets spoke of his coming, Zechariah declared his arrival, and John the Baptist would later fulfill his calling as messenger of the Lord, preparing the way for the purifying and tender embrace of God. The cry of that crazy, wilderness dwelling, camel hair wearing, locust and honey eating, messenger of God is what it took then and what it takes today to help us prepare the way of the Lord this advent.

Luke 3:4-6 Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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."

As we dare to imagine God's embrace, may these words come to us as equal parts challenge and promise. The Lord is coming—so get to work preparing the way for the Lord. The Lord is coming, and it will change you! The Lord is coming—in your deepest, darkest moments, believe in this promise: the Lord is coming to renew, restore, and redeem. AMEN