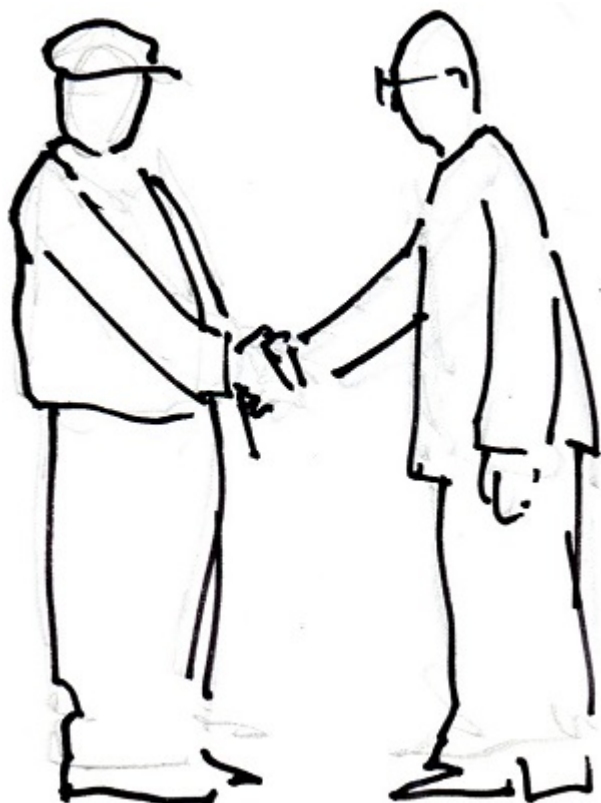


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by Pat Marrin

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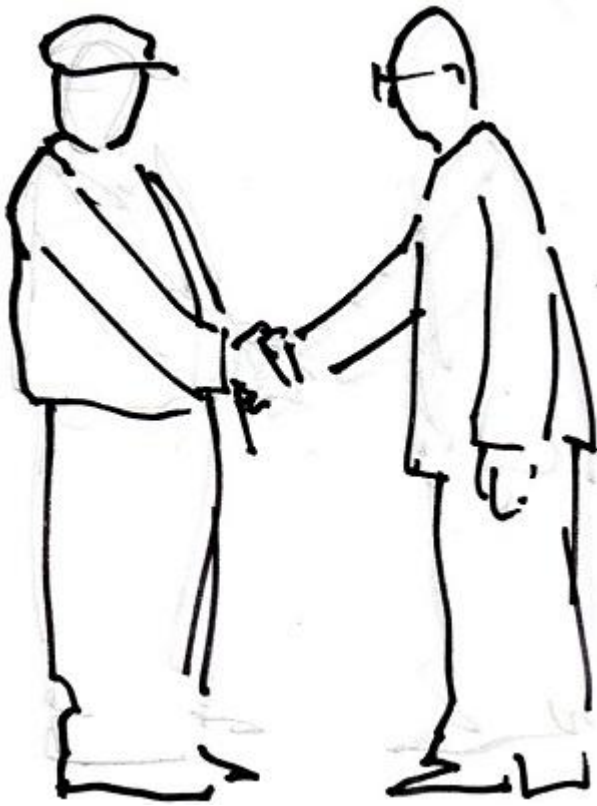
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“All who heard these things took them to heart” (Luke 1:66).

*Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1:57-66*

As we approach Christmas, the Lectionary will complete the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their newborn son, John. His story, like his role as precursor, ushers in the story of Jesus. We are at the threshold between the two covenants, the first under the Law and the new one under Grace.

The reading from the prophet Malachi expresses the hope that God will come to rescue Israel from its enemies, and this same theme will be continued in Zechariah’s canticle (tomorrow’s Gospel). The promised messiah will “save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us” (Luke 1:71). John the Baptist will later echo his father’s promise that God’s justice was coming to save the righteous and punish the wicked.

Christmas will reveal something different and even scandalous. Under the covenant of Grace, God’s Servant will come not to punish enemies but to reconcile them. Mercy will vanquish enemies by making them friends, overcoming sinners with unconditional love. Even at the births of John and Jesus, the stage was being set for the later confrontation between them as the disciples of John came to question

Jesus. John, who was waiting in Herod's dungeon, was wondering if Jesus' gentle, merciful ways meant he had pointed out the wrong messiah.

The scandal of the Gospel, then and now, is whether God is too easy on bad people. What satisfaction is there in that, if you happen to be one of the "good" people? The righteous were shocked at Jesus for eating with public sinners, working miracles for pagans and welcoming outcasts. How can the real messiah teach the Chosen People to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you," to "turn the other cheek" and to "go the extra mile" with those who oppressed them?

What are we to make of this message as we celebrate Christmas at the time when our nation is immersed in the throes of a deep-seated conflict within our own government now fueling serious social divisions? Words like "hate" and "enemy" and "civil war" have been used to describe the crisis, and even among the churches the political debate is being touted as a showdown between good and evil.

If this all seems outside the spirit of the season, addressing real differences in our own time is not far from acknowledging the struggles for power in the violent world Jesus was born into. The question is whether Christmas will encourage in us a commitment to reconciliation and peace. Will the scandal of the Christmas be welcome in our hearts as we engage family, friends, neighbors and colleagues over the holidays? If the fears and threats that divide people can be bridged and healed, it will begin with ordinary people like us, as both believers and citizens, who welcome, listen to and seek common ground with others.

What better welcome can we give the Prince of Peace?

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