

Peace

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Today is the second Sunday in Advent. The theme is peace. That seems appropriate at this time of year. Didn't the announcing angels declare "peace on earth and goodwill to men" to the shepherds in the field?

To get a handle on what peace means I looked to a few resources. For a change, I didn't consult Merriam-Webster's dictionary first. I went in search of quotes about peace. These two stood out to me:

"Peace is the brief glorious moment in history when everybody stands around reloading." - Lloyd Cory

"Washington has a large assortment of peace monuments. We build one after every war," – Don MacLean

These two struck me because, though a bit cynical, they seem to speak to the reality of life in the world today.

Next, I consulted the dictionary which is where I found these descriptions of peace:

1 : a state of tranquility or quiet: such as

a: freedom from civil disturbance – peace in our streets

b: a state of security or order within a community provided for by law or custom – the peace that comes when all follows laws and customs.

2: freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions – the often-elusive peace of mind

3: harmony in personal relations – being at peace with those around you

4 a: a state or period of mutual concord between governments

b: a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity or a state of being without war – this is perhaps the most popular understanding of peace.

I also looked up the meaning of the Hebrew word Shalom which we tend to think of as meaning peace. Turns out it actually means a few more things: tranquility, safety, well-being, welfare, health, contentment, success, *comfort*, wholeness, and integrity.

The word *comfort* turns up in both the definition of Shalom and as a synonym for the word peace. I found that helpful in looking at today's Scripture verses from Isaiah where God calls out "Comfort, comfort my people." God is speaking peace to a people who have lost hope of any peace. Their country had been attacked and taken over by an enemy nation. The Temple of their God had been completely destroyed. For the

past several decades, those who survived had been forced to live in a foreign land.

The people may have reflected on these words from Psalm 85 and wondered if they were really true:

⁸I will listen to what God the LORD says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—
but let them not turn to folly.

⁹Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.

¹²The LORD will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.

After living in exile for so long, the people had likely begun to wonder if the god of Babylon, Marduk, was more powerful than their God. After all, hadn't the Babylonian army defeated Israel's best? With the Temple destroyed, was God even present with His people? It is into this scenario of doubt and despair that Isaiah receives a new message from God to share with his people. He is to speak words of peace to these people and

let them know the time of their punishment is coming to a close. The glory of their God will be revealed in their release from captivity. When Isaiah hears a voice saying, “Cry out,” he asks, “What shall I cry?”

The message he receives is that people and situations in life will come and go, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. But here is the interesting thing, God calls on His people to speak His word so that all can hear it, so that His Word will continue in the consciousness of His created people. They are to go to the mountain top, where everyone can see and hear. From that mountain top they are to loudly proclaim the Word of the Lord without fear or anxiety. They can do so because their Lord is Sovereign, coming with power and might. Yet this same Lord gently tends to the needs of his people, gathering them as a shepherd gathers his sheep, holding them close and leading them along the right path.

And it is here the reading of Scripture ends. How did the people of Isaiah’s time receive this message? Again, because of all they had been subjected to, there probably was a struggle to see how this God of theirs could be more powerful than the god they had been forced to live under for so long. Could they really believe that their God would appear in glory for all to see?

Now let me ask you this, are we any different? As we look around us today and see rampant consumerism, wars around the world taking untold lives and using precious resources, and religious zealotry pitting different understandings of God against each other, can we speak as Isaiah did? In this divided world, who will believe that God will become present in a way that “all people shall see it together?”

We, God’s people, His church, are to be the:

“voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare

the way for the LORD;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.^[b]

⁴Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.

⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.”

And this is what we are to do:

You who bring good news to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”
¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

We are called to show the world that our God is more powerful than any of the other “gods” of this day: greed, jealousy, lust for power, wealth, and fame, just to name a few. In Advent we hear the words of the angels to the shepherds “peace on earth” and are challenged to take our place as the prophets of this time bringing that same message to a hurting world. To do that we need to overcome our own timidity and objections, to find our own voice, and cry out like Isaiah, words of comfort and assurance to those who feel defeated in this life, those who feel they are separated from the church, or have been abandoned by God, to share the message that God will arrive and will come in His gentle power to bring peace.

God’s message is that peace will come, but that it starts with each of us. May the words of this song become a prayer for us this Advent season, Let there be peace on earth:

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth
The peace that was meant to be.
With God as our Father
Brothers all are we.
Let me walk with my brother
In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now.
With every step I take
Let this be my solemn vow;
To take each moment and live
Each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me.

May it be so.

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Hatfield Church of the Brethren