

Shalom!

Psalm 119:105-112

Isaiah 55:10-13

Knowing I would be speaking after being away for over a week between Annual Conference and visiting with far-flung family, I decided to work ahead on my message for today. That meant tapping into my archive to find something that I didn't need to start from scratch. I chose this message on the lectionary selection from Isaiah for July 12. Sadly, little has changed in the six years since I first spoke these words. This is what I said six years ago:

“As I was trying to put something together for this morning, my mind was continually drawn to the many disheartening world events happening around us: a global pandemic, economic breakdown, Black Lives Matter (not just in the US but around the world), China's crackdown in Hong Kong, and all these news stories just top the list of sad scenarios around the world. So many people hurting in so many different ways, in so many places. The next thing I know, Jackie DeShannon was singing in my head:

What the world needs now

Is love, sweet love

It's the only thing that there's just too little of

What the world needs now

Is love, sweet love

No, not just for some, but for everyone”

Why does it seem like so little has changed? While COVID is no longer a pressing epidemic, we are hearing rumblings of Ebola and other infectious diseases that can spread with the peoples of the world traveling between countries for the soccer World Cup. The economy is certainly not where anyone wants it to be. The situation in the Middle East is still shaky. People of color in our country are still being oppressed, imprisoned, or deported unfairly. Ireland is burning, the Philippines and Venezuela have been rocked by earthquakes, and El Nino threatens severe weather worldwide. I think we need something more than just love.

Love is a pleasing word and a pleasant concept, to be sure. We have heard that love is not just a feeling - it is a way of being. If we put our love into action, we will be led to another word I kept coming across— Shalom. Not a word we often use in our day-to-day speech, but a word we should all become familiar with for the benefit of others and ourselves.

Shalom is often cited as meaning peace. We need to understand that the peace of shalom is so much more than just the absence of conflict, as we normally might think of peace. Shalom encompasses health, wholeness, well-being, tranquility, satisfaction, safety, prosperity, and right relationships - perfect

contentment. Shalom is the peace we find with God. Shalom is what the world needs now.

Both of today's Scripture readings call the listener to shalom. Isaiah was writing to the exiles on their return to Jerusalem from Babylon. He was instructing them that shalom would be found by giving their full attention to the God who had delivered them once again from estrangement in a foreign land. The psalmist writes that in living the life of faith, regardless of one's circumstances, the believer will have the light of God to lead them forward in peace, to experience shalom.

In Psalm 119 the writer acknowledges that it is God's word that guides their life. Although they have experienced trials, often of their own making, they are aware that by following God's teachings, his precepts, they are saved. The psalmist commits to following God all the days of their life. They have learned that in doing so, they will experience shalom, the joy of their heart, that God's word promises them.

In the passage from Isaiah, God confirms what the psalmist has written. God's word will not return empty. Just as the rain and snow water the earth causing the crops to grow and flourish, so will God's word cause his people to grow and flourish. As we grow and flourish, being nourished by God's word, His purpose will be achieved. What is God's purpose? That all people experience shalom.

God created the world in shalom with the Garden of Eden. When sin entered the world, shalom was lost. So, we find ourselves today reading deeply depressing headlines and looking for some good news. The Gospel of Christ *is* the Good News we are looking for. But for many of us that good news seems to fall short. We turn on the nightly news and see violence, anger, and brokenness in our world. We look at our relationships and see anxiety and drama. Don't forget the threads of racial tension and hate running through our social media accounts. Where is shalom?

God wants shalom in our world, the world He created. Shalom between all types of people, shalom between men and women, shalom for those living on the margins of society, and shalom in our homes. God wants shalom to cross divides between nations and races. God wants us to embrace His shalom. For that reason, He sent His son, Jesus, the one Isaiah referred to as the "Prince of Peace" or Sar Shalom.

As the psalmist points out, though, this shalom is not the absence of trouble or pain. It is the joy of the Lord in the midst of our struggles. We can look to the Apostle Paul who said he could be content in any circumstance and demonstrated that contentment even while a prisoner. In jail at Philippi, he sang and remained confident of God's graciousness to him. As a result of Paul's practice of shalom, the Philippian jailer and his family came to the Lord.

We need this kind of shalom today. In a world gone mad, where do we find the confidence to find peace amid chaos? We find it in the words of Jesus, spoken even as he knew that the cross was before him:

John 14:27 (NIV2011)

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

This kind of peace enables us to remain calm while others around us seem to be coming unglued. The world situation calls for believers to exhibit shalom, and to work toward shalom for all people. When all people are seen as bearing the image of their Creator God, when all people are protected from victimization and violence, when all people are valued as fellow human beings, then we will see shalom in our world.

I know the call to shalom can feel daunting. In my seminary class on the Sermon on the Mount, it was stated that to achieve true peace takes generations to make happen. You might say, “But, I’m just one person! I’m not a celebrity with a public voice. How can I help bring shalom to the world?” Each of us can take small steps, remember that old song, “Brighten the corner where you are.” When each of us does what we can in our little corner of the world, together we can build toward the goal of shalom. We can be the first of many generations that commit to calling the world back to the shalom that God intended.

Let's start by becoming aware of who our neighbors are. Get to truly know someone who is different from you. Don't just assume you know, hear their stories, and learn from what they say. We have the opportunity through our food pantry to get to know our neighbors and what their needs are. Feel free to engage people in conversation when they visit. As you walk around your neighborhood, strike up a conversation with someone sitting on their porch or working in their garden. You never know when the opportunity to give witness to God's grace and goodness, His shalom, will present itself.

Max Lucado sums this up in this excerpt from his book, *Facing Your Giants*:

“Mark well this promise: “God will keep in perfect peace all who trust in Him, whose thoughts are fixed on Him” (Isa. 26:3) God promises not just peace but perfect peace (shalom). Undiluted, unspotted, unhindered peace. To whom? To those whose minds are “fixed” on God. Forget occasional glances. Dismiss random ponderings. Peace is promised to the one who fixes thoughts and desires on the King.”

When our hearts are truly set on keeping the decrees of the Lord, His Word will not return empty, but will accomplish what He desires and will achieve His purpose for it. The end result of all that God desires will be that we will go out in joy and be led forth in peace, in shalom. All of creation will rejoice in God's shalom and the trees of the fields will clap their hands with joy.

I close with a prayer written by Helen Weaver:

Almighty God, who are mother and father to us all,
Look upon your planet Earth divided.
Help us to know that we are all your children,
that all nations belong to one great family.
Multiply our prayers in every land
Until the whole Earth becomes your congregation,
United in your love.
Sustain our vision of a peaceful future
And give us strength to work unceasingly
To make that vision real.
AMEN

May it be so!

Lynne McMullan Allebach

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