

“MAKING PEACE WITH ADVENT TIME”

Isaiah 35; Luke 1:46-55

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We've lit our second Advent candle, on this second Sunday of Advent, for peace – as have hundreds and thousands of other Christians this day - many probably wondering how we can even be talking about peace, given the state of our world.

It's fair to wonder about that. The wars that were going on this time last year are mostly still going on. Some have gotten worse. In some parts of the world it's so bad that literally millions of people have been displaced from their homes and the situation is so dangerous that aid workers can't even get food and water to them. The nations of the world haven't come together to address climate issues or the refugee crisis or other urgent shared problems. Hate and mistrust haven't noticeably diminished. Random acts of violence have us all thinking about security in public places, and violence, against women and children, especially, continues to be a problem. Nearly 20 per cent of Americans struggle with anxiety in any given year. Where is this peace we're talking about?

This is supposed to be the season of “peace and goodwill,” so we may try to participate in that holiday message. We sing the songs. I often send out Christmas cards that say “Peace” on the front, maybe with a nice dove. We watch the heartwarming Christmas movies about family reconciliations. We try to spread a little “peace and goodwill” as we go about our Christmas shopping and interact with neighbors or people we work with. But there this sense of participating in a seasonal theme that will end around the 2nd of January, when we'll go back to being cranky and bemoaning the state of our world, as we try to keep our New Year's resolutions for a couple of weeks at least.

But... in church, we have Advent, which is very different from a time of superficial good cheer. Advent is intended to be a serious season of reflection and repentance, preparation and waiting... for the coming of Jesus. In this time we think about Jesus coming again and making all things new. *And* we think about WHY we needed God to send Jesus in the first place... A big part of the reason is precisely because our grasp on peace is so tenuous.

Advent is a time for recognizing, not avoiding, this reality. Advent time is for acknowledging that we live in a tension between the brokenness of our lives and our world, and the peace to which God beckons us. It seems to me that the first “peacemaking” call of Advent is inner work: making peace with Advent time – with its uncertainty, with its fragile hope, its call to us - and our oh-so-human limitations.

In this sense, Advent simply recalls us to an all-the-time reality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Our entire life is Advent, a time of waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, to see peace on earth and goodwill among people.”

It takes a lot of courage to live your whole life in Advent time. To make peace with the fact that we won't see all the problems solved and all the wrongs righted. To make peace with the knowledge of what we can do and what we can't. To make peace with the realization that not every broken relationship can be mended and that sometimes we have to release other people to make their own choices. To make peace with hurts we can't heal. To make peace with a vision of God's peace that seems so far away. To make peace with the longing. This is all hard.

Which may be why, for many Christians – and others - the longing for peace got turned into a search for *inner* peace. We can't do anything about wars, tensions between countries and communities, people who want to hate and fight, the disagreements in our families, the pressures of modern life... so we turn to practices that help us tune out the bad news and the noise and the stress, and seek to maintain a personal, inner serenity in spite of or apart from it all. Or we simply focus on a relationship with Jesus and trust that the personal peace it brings us is all that really matters.

Inner peace is a great thing, and I definitely believe that most of us need to attend to the disquiet and anxieties and angers within; it is hard to be at peace with others when you aren't at peace with yourself. It's hard to be a channel of God's peace when you aren't quite right in your relationship with God.

But in Advent we recall scriptures like those we read this morning. The visions of peace that the prophet Isaiah and Mary lift up for us are not about inner peace. They are visions of God's *shalom*, which is very definitely about the real world needs of people and communities. Shalom is peace, but also wholeness, safety, dignity, fairness, and a special concern for the neediest and most vulnerable. It's not a mere absence of overt conflict or any kind of forced peace. Shalom demands justice. *God* demands justice. God's love is a desire for all people – and all creation – to flourish. This all can seem really idealistic and impossible to us. But keep in mind: like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, both the prophet Isaiah and Mary speak from times when peace did not look like a realistic prospect. Yet they speak about an anticipated time of peace so vividly that you know it's real to them; their words are alive with conviction.

In my reading this week, I came across this prayer for peace:

"Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."
(from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, originally found in the Gregorian Sacramentary, a tenth century illuminated manuscript containing liturgy for a priest or bishop leading mass.)

That prayer, found in some modern prayer books, comes from a 10th century Latin illuminated manuscript... which means that people have been praying it for at least 900 years. Undoubtedly Christians were praying for peace for centuries before that. And before there was Christianity, at least as far back as the Hebrew prophets, "shalom" was the desire and hope of God's people.

What to make of this? All that time, all those prayers. Were they useless? Why don't we have peace yet?

We aren't wrong to ask that. To grieve it. But we should also remember that in those many years, there *were* times and places of relative peace, when people and human cultures flourished. And in times and places where peace was hard to find, through all those years, there were people who not only prayed for peace, but kept alive the vision of peace, lived peacefully, and worked to build peaceful communities.

Pope Francis has said that we pray for hungry people, and then we feed them. The prayer and the action are all of a piece. Without the action, the prayer is incomplete. We might say something similar about peace: We pray for peace, and then we do something about it. Just because we can't do everything doesn't mean we can't do anything. This morning we are praying for peace, singing about peace, lighting candles for peace.... and after this morning, we'll extend those prayers through what we do.

So I want to suggest some things we can do to carry our peace prayers beyond today:

Mr. Rogers said that when bad things happen, you should always look for the helpers, because there are always helpers. Similarly, we could say that when we see conflict and feel tension, we need to look for the peacemakers. Because there are always peacemakers, and if we look we can find them.

We don't have to look very hard, really. The plaques just inside our main doors list 40 years of Westminster Peace Prize recipients, individuals and organizations, many of them still doing their thing. There are also organizations like Doctors Without Borders, World Central Kitchen, the Peace Corps, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, Seeds of Peace, of course the United Nations, and many more. And there are mediators, counselors, young anti-gun violence advocates, writers and artists who use their gifts to promote peace, community organizers, people working to enact restorative justice.

And when we find the people committed to peace, we can start by learning about them, and learning *from* them. Ask "What does this particular peacemaking work involve?" "Why is it needed?" "What does this person, these people, this group have to teach me about peace, or peacemaking?" "What motivates them?" "How do they sustain the vision of peace, their work, and their hope?"

Then we can consider how to support or encourage the work of those peacemakers. You could choose a person or group involved in peacemaking and follow their work. Tell other people about it, write letters of support or thanks, donate, pray for them, get involved.

We can look for ways to emulate the actions, spirit, and commitment of those peacemakers – in our relationships and in our community.

Of course an important way to give life to our prayers for peace is to become willing makers of peace, when we are able. Perhaps there is someone with whom you need to reconcile, or simply someone toward whom you can cultivate a more peaceful attitude. A grudge or expectation you could release. A misunderstanding to clear up. Perhaps there's a rift in your family or elsewhere you can help mend. Hurtful behaviors you could try to change. Someone who's felt excluded you could embrace. Can you begin to see yourself as a peacemaker?

When we commit ourselves to understanding the ways others have been threatened, marginalized, and denied dignity, that's a kind of prayer for peace. When we choose, in a world that glorifies violence, to be non-violent in our thoughts, words, and actions, that's a kind of prayer for peace. When we refuse to make peace with things we shouldn't make peace with – that's a kind of prayer for peace, too.

I usually hate it when people say "prayer works," as if prayer is a kind of tool we can wield to achieve a particular result. I don't believe that's a faithful understanding of prayer. But I like this idea of "prayer that works" in the sense of prayer that becomes action, becomes connection, becomes life of "shalom." May the prayers for peace we pray today be those kind of prayers, and may we be some of the people who keep the vision of God's peace alive in our time. Amen.