

The Rocky Road to Peace

Advent, as I think I've said here before, has often been a very conflicted time of the year for me. My body has always seemed to react naturally to the shorter days and less clement weather by wanting to sleep more and do less just at a time when the built-in rhythms of the ministry, the theatre season or the school year are reaching peaks of activity. I don't think it's profound enough to be called "Seasonal Affective Disorder" but my tendency to contemplation, solitude and somber thinking are also heightened in the darkness of the year, just as the holidays bring frenetic activity, multiple invitations to various festivities and a kind of societal mania. And, of course, the ancient traditions of Advent call for an almost-Lenten time of reflection and repentance at the same time our quasi-religious culture insists that we start the celebrations of any available cultic observance, be it Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or what-have-you, earlier and earlier and ramp them up to a final blow-out that lasts from the Winter Solstice to the turn of the calendar year.

Last week, I was able to preach with good will and full integrity about hope. Hope, it seems to me, binds together those of us with sunny and gloomy dispositions. Even in my most grumpy of moods, I find it possible to rejoice in hope and this has been true for me even at the worst times in my life. I am able to rest in hope because, in the words of Job who had come to the end of his hope, "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand upon the latter day of the earth..." I have been aware of the presence of my Redeemer, of "God With Us," in the dark times when death seemed everywhere in my life when I was a teenager, when I feared for the lives of my wife and our first child at his birth, when personal and professional disappointments seemed overwhelming. I am and always have been able to take to heart the ultimate lesson of the apocalyptic sections of the Bible: God is in charge; the Creator God who saw all things and called them good; the God of Abraham who blesses those who are faithful and daring; the Loving Abba of Jesus who seeks us out and cherishes us even when we are in the midst of rebellion. God is in charge and promises that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

But when it comes to this week of peace, it is very much on my heart once again that the gloomiest of prophets, Jeremiah, inveighed against the court clergy of his time: "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace... Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord." I would by no means lead you astray, my brothers and my sisters. In our world, there is as yet little true peace, neither in the fields of battle nor in the courts of law nor the halls of business nor yet in the hearts of much of humankind. But I am not Jeremiah and I do have a word of hope. I want to talk this morning about the rocky road to peace, about the hard work that is ahead of us to prepare the way for the Lord, but I want to do so in the context of remembering hope, remembering that Jesus has come down that we might have love and life and joy and even peace.

In that spirit, let us turn to our scriptures for this morning. Both Luke, in referring to John the Baptizer, and the probably pseudonymous author of the book of Baruch partially quote the words of Isaiah: "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of

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the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” It is a part of Isaiah’s great vision of the peace that is to come, recorded for us in chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah. I take it as a reminder this morning that preparing the way of the Lord, working towards the Beloved Community and true shalom for all people and for our planet, is hard work on the order of tearing down mountains, filling valleys, and leveling uneven ground with the hand tools available to the Iron Age Israelites.

I hope you all understand that I am using this image in the way of those Biblical writers of apocalyptic. This is metaphor and hyperbole. I am not intending to send you out this morning with picks and shovels in your hands to leave scars on the landscape. Indeed, one of the dreadful sins of our generation is the leveling of the mountains of my ancestral Appalachia not to prepare the way of the Lord but to fulfill the greed of humankind for cheap power, coal and the temporary riches that result from the irreversible degradation of God’s beautiful creation. If you don’t know what I mean, google “mountaintop removal” and see what you find.

What Luke and Baruch and Isaiah and I mean with this metaphor is the truly earthshattering change that will have to take place in human society to fulfill the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray to our Loving Creator: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Those things which we have placed on high will have to be brought down so that God can take God’s appropriate place in our hearts. That which we have despised must be raised up to a level playing field.

I am confident that you understand what the prophets mean in this regard. In those days, people were quick, just as they are now, to enthrone worldly success, material gain and status as their gods. Oh, we may scoff at the way they embodied their desires in little statues of fertility gods and deities of war and offered up prayers and sacrifices to them. But is that really so different from the time some spend examining the minutiae of the stock market reports or the latest pronouncements of their financial gurus or the reports from the pundits on “How to Make America Great Again”? My sisters and my brothers, we must tear these idols down from their high places in our lives if we are to prepare the way of the Lord to take their place. And we must carry that message into our community, just as Isaiah and Baruch and the Baptizer did. And people will not want to hear it from us any more than they wanted to hear it from them. It will be hard work but we will carry with us the hope that God has blessed and will bless us.

While we cast down and call for others to join us in casting down that which has been inappropriately elevated, we must also remember to help in the work of God of raising up that which has been inappropriately dented. Primarily, Isaiah and the others were speaking not so much of a “what” as of a “whom.” Jesus, you will remember, cited Isaiah when he tried to explain to his family and friends in Nazareth what he felt called to do. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” It is the continuing mission of the Body of Christ to raise up the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the oppressed – anyone whom our fallen society has judged to be of lesser worth, incurable, uncorrectable, irredeemable. Only when self-serving power has been humbled and “the least of these” have been restored can we find true peace. It will be hard work but we will carry with us the hope that God has blessed and will bless us.

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I suspect some of you were wondering when I was going to come back to peace. Some time ago, I reposted a quotation on our Good Shepherd Baptist Church Facebook page. It is from a book titled Wishful Thinking by the great writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, now nearly 90. Hear now the word of the Lord: “Peace has come to mean the time when there aren’t any wars or even when there aren’t any major wars. Beggars can’t be choosers; we’d most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew peace, shalom, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself...” We heard earlier, in the words from Baruch, one beautiful vision of peace, again derived from the words of Isaiah. There’s another such vision, this one from the prophet Micah, which also shares some of the language of Isaiah and which I dearly love. Listen: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.” Can you imagine, my friends, a world, a nation, a Lynnwood in which all of our neighbors could sit under their own vines and their own fig trees and no one should make them afraid? God has planted this vision of shalom, of justice and equality in our hearts and we can work toward it by word and deed. It will be hard work but we will carry with us the hope that God has blessed and will bless us.

We are called, my sisters and my brothers, to work in our world to prepare the way of the Lord by working for peace, for justice, for shalom. But even as we do this work in our world, we must do the work in our own hearts. Hear me: we cannot wait until our hearts are “perfect” before we set about God’s work in our world. If we wait until we are “ready,” we will never accomplish a thing. The Holy Spirit works within us to bring us closer to God at every moment in our lives. Listen again to how Malachi saw the coming of the Promised One among and within us: “The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.” Here again is the fearsome language of apocalyptic: things sound grim but be of good hope for our Loving Creator is in charge. Just as Jesus promised, the Comforter is within us, lovingly pulling us towards God and away from the selfishness and brokenness that lead us away from God. Part of our Baptist heritage is a hymn book compiled by John Rippon, an English Baptist pastor of the 18th century. He included a hymn by an unknown author whom I think got it exactly right: “When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be they supply. The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.” Returning to the words of Frederick Buechner, let me finish the quotation I started before: “...for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.” It will be hard work but we will carry with us the hope that God has blessed and will bless us.

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My sisters and my brothers, during the season of Advent we are especially aware that we Christians live in what might be called a temporal paradox. The kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, the Messiah of Israel, the Second Person of the Trinity. But the kingdom is not yet, for we must take up the mantle of Jesus and move forward towards the fulfillment of the kingdom, the universal application of the Beloved Community. For us, the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, is immediate and available in the love of God for us. But for too much of the world, peace is elusive and seemingly far away. Let us bend our hearts towards peace and towards justice and work with all our might to spread both the word and the reality of God's peace. In that way, we will help our neighbors along the rocky road to peace so that all peoples may join together in the songs of blessing for our God and Savior which shall never cease. Amen.