



“The Way of Peace”

Isaiah 40:1-5, 10-11; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 1:67-79

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December 6, 2009

Second Sunday of Advent

It’s right there, front and center, in the first Christmas carol ever sung. Outside Bethlehem, a choir of angels appeared and sang to some startled shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men....”

Peace stands in the center of the Christmas story and at the heart of the Christian message. God sends peace to the earth. God’s will is peace on earth. God is determined to heal this broken world with peace.

The first Christmas Eve was not the beginning of God’s peace initiative. In a sense the entire biblical story is the story of God’s determination to establish and spread peace – the Hebrew word is “shalom” – across the earth.

The Gospel Lesson is the joyous song of a priest, Zechariah, at the birth of his son, John. The boy grew up to become John the Baptist and from the beginning, his father knew his boy was part of God’s great peace initiative on earth. This boy, the old man sings, will prepare the way for God’s peace. We will soon experience the “tender mercies” of God. God is about to introduce a new and powerful “way of peace.”

Centuries earlier, the great prophet Isaiah, whose voice we’ve heard today in song, looked to the day that God’s people will experience God’s shalom. In fact, the first words of our Old Testament Lesson, Isaiah 40:1-4, are the first words of Handel’s “Messiah.” After a long, powerful and stirring overture, a tenor voice cries out, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.”

Handel had a wonderful capacity to make music do what the words of the text say. The first words of the Messiah speak of comfort, and Handel’s music is comforting. I once asked a musician how Handel did it. He told me Handel uses a tonic chord with descending notes. I don’t know what that means, but I do know it works. If you pay attention and “hear” the music, it brings comfort.

Handel is not finished with Isaiah 40 yet. Later in the Oratorio, a contralto takes up Isaiah’s voice to sing of God’s shalom. It’s a vivid image from verses 10-11:

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd,
and he shall gather the lambs in his arms; and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

I suspect you know that the Hebrew word for peace, shalom, is a comprehensive word packed with content. Biblical peace is much more than the cessation of war and conflict. Shalom is primarily the presence of everything that is good, plus the absence of all that is bad. Shalom is harmony between us and God, harmony among people, and harmony of people with nature. It is the entire creation living in harmonious good will.

This shalom is described in the Bible by vivid word pictures. In another place Isaiah says when God's shalom comes,

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
And righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
And the result of righteousness,
 quietness and trust forevermore.
My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
 in secure dwellings, and in quiet
 resting places...
Happy will be you who sow beside every stream,
 who let the ox and the donkey range freely. (Is. 32:16ff)

Can you see it? Feel it? Shalom is God's gift to the world.

The Psalmist adds another picture of shalom:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
 justice and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
 and righteousness will look down from the sky. (Ps. 85:10-11)

Or listen to another picture of shalom – this one is often read at funerals.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
A feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines,
Of rich food filled with marrow,
Of well-aged wines strained clear. (Is. 25:6)

Shalom is the biblical vision for the world and for us. God is determined to spread shalom over the earth.

The longing for peace lies in the deepest places of the human heart. All nations and peoples long to be free of their enemies and to live in peace. We do not want to send our daughters and sons to war. We long for peace on earth.

But we also know that evil is real, not imaginary, and we have dangerous enemies, some of whom want us dead and defeated. Armies are necessary and peace is elusive and, it seems, too seldom experienced in the long term.

We want our streets and neighborhoods to be safe and free of crime. We wish all homes were free of violence. People of good will want there to be food for everyone on earth, freedom to be the experience of every person, prosperity for all and good health to be universal.

We want our leaders and the leaders of the world to be more committed to the common good than to their own power. We want leaders who care deeply about the least citizen in the land. We want shalom. We long for, and many of us work for, universal harmony.

Yet we know peace is an elusive dream. We need police to patrol our streets. There are bullies on playgrounds and in homes in the neighborhood. We know the powerful tend to serve themselves first and sometimes serve only themselves.

And yet, about this time every year we hear the ancient song of the angels, "Peace on earth, good will to all people." In church we listen to the old Advent Lessons in which the prophets dream of God's shalom in its fullness and we join them. Meanwhile, the headlines make it quite clear that shalom is yet to come.

So we dream smaller dreams of peace for ourselves. We want a Christmas message of peace to be our experience. We desire peaceful, harmonious relationships. We want our families to be free of stress and conflict. We want the love of Christmas to fill our lives, our homes and our friendships. And we long for health, prosperity, good will and all God's goodness to bless us and those we love.

We wish shalom would come to our workplace. We'd like work to be free of conflict, jealousy, plots, stress, abuses of power, and even water-cooler pettiness. Many of you wish work could be fun again, even fulfilling, in these difficult days.

At the least, we long for peace of mind and soul no matter what the rest of life might be. So we take vacations to get "away from it all." We do weekends away, sometimes away from the kids, to recharge our batteries and renew our love. We take walks in the park and strolls in the garden. We find hobbies that drain the stress, calm us down, and change the subject. We long for peace.

And along the way we experience enough moments of joy and peace to assure us there is more out there. We remember those moments and long for more.

A number of years ago, my grandparents were killed in an automobile accident. We were living in Chicago at the time and I flew out to eastern Washington to help my parents take care of business and share their grief.

I hadn't been "home" to eastern Washington for more than a decade. When I stepped out of the airplane and walked down the steps to the tarmac, the familiar smells of my old home stirred up memories galore. I remembered things I hadn't thought of in years. Those smells and memories made me experience joy and peace long forgotten. For a moment, grief receded behind the brilliant light of peace.

In less dramatic ways, we experience shalom in the embrace of love. Holding someone dear and being held, creates shalom in us. Or, holding a child in our arms creates a joy and peace deeper than words. An evening with friends, or the Thanksgiving table last week, sets aside the ordinary of our lives and replaces it with the peace and joy that come from love.

Some of get lost in music or a good book. Away from the humdrum of our lives, we enter a place where peace touches our souls.

For most of us, this peaceful room filled with familiar sights, sounds and friends stirs up shalom in our hearts. Week by week in this world so lacking in shalom, we come to this place of rest, quiet, acceptance, support, and love, and here we meet the God who gives shalom in all its forms.

And time after time, the faith we find and express here creates shalom among and in us. God comes to us and gives shalom to all who ask.

The way of peace is simple yet profound. Shalom begins with the God of all shalom. God's character and behavior is the way of peace. Did you notice that in all our readings this morning God is a gentle shepherd who holds us close and with tender mercies tends our deepest needs?

When we imitate God's peace, we create God's peace. The way of peace is gentleness, tender mercy, and loving relationships. As the New Testament writer James says, "Those who sow peace reap a bountiful harvest of peace." Conversely, there is no peace for those with hard hearts, a merciless outlook, and a self-serving orientation.

Shalom is best known in love. Love by its nature includes trust, mutual submission, and faithful service. It is no accident that the Bible describes God as a wise, gentle and loving

Plymouth Church
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parent. Those of us who are parents know a love too deep for words and the profound peace that accompanies that love.

Love creates shalom. It's the way God works. It's the way of peace for God's people. Shalom is a gracious gift from a God determined to give it to us. It is a profound responsibility us recipients. Those who sow peace reap peace.

Amen

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