

## December 4th, 2022 | Second Sunday of Advent | 'Peace, Peace' When There is No Peace

You might recall that we were expecting to have Judith Moses speaking to us this morning, but unfortunately Judith contracted covid this week and had to postpone her visit, so we'll look forward to having her with us sometime in the spring. This resulted in a sudden change in my plans for the weekend, and I really didn't mind because, as you know, I actually love to spend time reflecting on theology, and this is especially true for me over the season of advent, a time that is rich in religious and spiritual symbol, ritual and meaning in the life of the church. It is also a season rich in resources, which are easy to get lost in!

This minor disruption might have influenced the title of my talk today – 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace – which initially came to my mind with just a hint of snarkiness.(I had anticipated a relatively peaceful weekend marking papers ahead.) And if I were superstitious about these things, I might suspect that choosing this title had something to do with Walter getting sick, which did result in one or two loose ends today – like tech! So, my apologies to Walter for any part I played in that (and we are all hoping you are better soon)! Of course, spending the weekend reflecting on peace meant that I had to succumb to several *peaceless* exchanges with family members yesterday that were almost entirely my fault. Sigh...(I hope that one day I will be able to write about peace and practice it at the same time, but that day wasn't yesterday.)

So here I am, here we are –  
"Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

This title is not my own, of course, it comes to us via the prophet Jeremiah, who is writing to the Jews in exile in Babylon around 300BC. In chapter 6 Jeremiah writes - "Thus says the Lord... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace." (NIV) In the NASV it's said like this, "They have healed the brokenness of my people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace."

This word, "peace" is rooted in the ancient Hebrew word "shalom," which does not simply mean the absence of conflict/turmoil – the meaning is much fuller than this – it points to wholeness, completeness, soundness, health and safety. In the bible the word "shalom" is used to describe the Kingdom of God, or as David Moore put it "God's intended reality." Shalom is the world as God (or Love) would have it.

I think the reason this verse rose to the surface of my consciousness when I first thought about writing an advent reflection on "peace" is because the word "peace" or "shalom" calls us to consider the lack of this reality in our lives and in the world. And this is a part of the meaning of Advent. In advent we wait. And today our attention is directed to the advent of peace.

I don't know how you feel about this time of year, but our commercialized way of celebrating Christmas (in western society in particular) strikes me as a harsh contradiction to the message

of 'peace' the season proclaims. Kate Bowler calls it "the hustle and bustle of capitalism and chaos."

Even as a young girl, I remember a certain kind of melancholy or sadness that would start to sink in just as our Christmas celebrations came to an end. *Something was missing and I knew it.* There was a longing I felt for something more, and that 'more' had nothing to do with Christmas cookies, or presents, or boxing day sales.

And while I have tried in my own ways, I wouldn't say I've been all that successful at doing it a different way. *When it comes to Christmas, the cultural current we're immersed in is a strong one.*

This week, as I've thought about "peace" and reflected on the context of God's lament that comes through the weeping prophet, I've wondered if we all might look and sound a bit like the Israelites to whom Jeremiah was speaking, as we hustle our way through December saying "peace, peace" when so much evidence points to the contrary.

And so, on this Second Sunday of Advent, as we light a candle for peace, I think we are given an important opportunity to consider what is not whole, complete, sound, or reconciled in ourselves, and in our world – to consider the places and the people where and for whom we are longing for peace?

I think of the people of Ukraine and all those suffering because of war.

I think of refugees everywhere, fleeing homes because of famine, fires and floods induced by the climate crises, because of political unrest, and oppression of all kinds.

I think of the protests in Iran and the woman crying out for justice, for equality, for liberation.

I think of those stuck in cycles of violence they cannot escape.

I think of the LGBTQ+ community and the lives lost in the recent shooting in Colorado Springs

I think of the unhoused people in our own town, our country, and all over the world.

I think of all those who lack access to safe water, food, medical care, and a living wage.

And I think of generational trauma and the violence we do to ourselves, for all kinds of reasons, and the loops of inner turmoil our weary minds get stuck inside

I think of the prayers we say aloud each week, and the ones we hold inside as we long for peace, for shalom, and for weighty words like righteousness, justice and truth.

I think this longing is deeply rooted in the heart of God, and us in it. It is this longing the prophet Isaiah is connecting to when he prophecies –

1-5 A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,  
from his roots a budding Branch.  
The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him,  
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,  
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,  
the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-God.

Fear-of-God

will be all his joy and delight.

He won't judge by appearances,  
won't decide on the basis of hearsay.

He'll judge the needy by what is right,  
render decisions on earth's poor with justice.

His words will bring everyone to awed attention.

A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.

Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,  
and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

6-9 The wolf will romp with the lamb,  
the leopard sleep with the kid.  
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,  
and a little child will tend them.  
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,  
their calves and cubs grow up together,  
and the lion eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,  
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.

Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill  
on my holy mountain.

The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,  
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.(Isaiah 11:1-9, MSG)

This is the shalom we dare to long for today. And this shalom is prophesied to come through the tender shoot of Christ's arrival in one of the most vulnerable ways imaginable – as a newborn baby in the womb Mary, of an unwed, homeless teenager in Nazareth, who has the audacity to believe in the power of Love.

In his book, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, Walter Brueggemann writes, "The only shalom promised is one in the midst of historical reality, which comes close to saying "incarnation." The only God we know entered history, appeared as a person. Shalom of a

biblical kind is always somewhat scandalous -- never simply a liturgical experience or a mythical statement, *but one facing our deepest divisions and countering with a vision.*" (p.24)

One of the things I love most about the Christmas story is that we see God entering the mess with us in an act of radical solidarity with humanity. This is Love incarnate. You could say that in Christ, God becomes an activist for Love. And as Bono (one of the great activists of our time) points out, the key to activism is "to act." I can't think of a truer demonstration of Love in Action than what we witness through the birth and life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

But when Jesus, who Isaiah calls the Prince of Peace, appears, shalom does not simply descend on the earth, does it? Rather, in many ways, Jesus is a living demonstration of the people and places where and for whom shalom is lacking. Jesus, who John calls The True Light (John 1:9) illuminates injustice.

So I want to return for a moment to the last line in that quote from Brueggemann. He writes that "shalom of a biblical kind faces our deepest divisions and counters with a vision." Let's think about what those divisions might be together, what divisions do you see or experience yourselves, and what is the counter-vision of shalom Jesus offers us?

**Where is there Division?:**

\*I think of divisions of the heart, the mind, the body, the soul - personal internal divisions caused by shame. The idea that we are separate from God. I think of social, societal and systemic divisions.

**What is the counter-vision of Shalom?:**

I think of union with God, with Love, with creation, and with each other. (The Sermon on the Mount)

\*Christ describes himself in the Gospel of Thomas with this powerful statement of union: "I am the one who comes from what is undivided."

As I was writing and reflecting on the vision of shalom this weekend, I thought about so many of you, and how I continue to learn and become encouraged to live more justly *through* community. I thought of Ray's work, especially, with Vibrant Communities, and of the good therapists in our midst who come alongside us to help heal and support mental and emotional health. I thought of the gardeners, and the bartenders, and the composters, and the entrepreneurs, and the artists, and the teachers, and the healthcare providers, and the cooks, and the neighbors, and the musicians, and the childcare providers, and the town councilors, and more, and more, and more.

We have a vision of shalom. We have a longing for it.

Brueggemann explains that, “Shalom is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those resources and factors which make communal harmony joyous and effective.”

We can look around and see so much of it. But it’s here and it’s not here, isn’t it? Both/and. Now, and not yet.

In 1984, when the beloved Bishop Desmond Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end apartheid in South Africa, he said this: *“There is no peace in Southern Africa. There is no peace because there is no justice. There can be no real peace and security until first justice is enjoyed by all the inhabitants of that beautiful land. The Bible knows nothing about peace without justice, for that would be crying “peace, peace, where there is no peace”. God’s Shalom, peace, involves inevitably righteousness, justice, wholeness, fullness of life, participation in decision-making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, sharing and reconciliation.”* (Nobel Lecture in Oslo, Norway, December 11, 1984.)

This line, “no justice, no peace” has been a rally cry for political protests against acts of racial violence towards African Americans since 1987.

Considering all of this, perhaps it is fitting that the lectionary readings today end with John the Baptist yelling “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” And we are reminded that he is the one whom the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare for God’s arrival,

Make the road smooth and straight.’” (Matthew 3:3, MSG)

I think we could use a John the Baptist today. Because I don’t think of John’s call to repentance as a threat anymore, even though I was taught to hear it that way.<sup>1</sup> But now, I hear it as an invitation to participate in preparing for the arrival of Shalom – the kingdom of heaven, God’s intended reality, the world as Love would have it. And this requires Metanoia. It requires us to change our minds about the deep divisions within and without us, and to enter into a new vision. Even if all we can see is an old stump, advent invites us to wait with open expectation and to trust that a tender shoot will come.

So I want to send us home with a song by Ben Harper that invites us to participate in the practice of peace “with our own two hands” but first, I have one last quote from Walter Brueggemann that I couldn’t figure out how to fit so here it is now! He writes, “Think globally, and act locally. That is, you have to have a huge picture of shalom, but when you go to address it, it requires concrete, immediate, local actions.” So we can think about that as we listen to the song, and that will be it for today.

Blessings.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/12/thoughts-always-repeat-advent-sermon/>