

Where is the Promise of Peace on Earth

Hespeler, December 10, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11, [Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13](#), 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

As I thought about what I would preach on for this Sunday – this Second Sunday of Advent which is called Peace Sunday – I happened to be in a place where a lot of people seem to find themselves at this time of the year. Yes, that’s right, I was in a shopping mall.

It was shortly after Black Friday and the place was packed. Everyone was desperate. They all seemed to have millions of things to find, things like decorations and all the other things they would need for the big events of the season. And of course, there were lots of people who were frantic as they walked around and looked at how high the prices were. They were wondering how they could ever afford the gifts that they wanted to buy.

Frazzled Parents

The parents were looking pretty frazzled too. Their kids were going crazy looking for things they wanted to have and getting excited about the decorations and seeing Santa Claus. Many of them were looking as if they were at the very limits of their patience, and here we were only at the beginning of the season!

So, it was all a scene of noise, frustration and hurry. And yet, over top of all of it, blasting through the sound system of the entire mall, were the sounds of the most beautiful music proclaiming peace on earth, people of good will, love and joy. And it made me wonder, where is that promise of peace?

Other Struggles

Of course, there are a lot of other reasons why people aren’t feeling that peace than just the extraordinary hustle and bustle of the season. I don’t know about you, but I am connected these days with too many people who are deeply troubled by personal crises – their own and those of the people they love.

There are medical challenges and the sometimes-impossible choices that go along with them. People are trying to recover from devastating accidents and deal with debilitating treatments and therapies. Others are dealing with grief so raw that they don’t think that they will ever feel whole. When they hear the soundtrack of the season promising peace on earth, how can they not ask where is the promise of peace?

Countries at War

And, of course, we haven’t even touched the really big issue when it comes to peace on earth. For the people of Ukraine, for the unwilling Russian conscripts, for the people of Gaza and the West Bank enduring unrelenting bombing and the people of Israel who, whether they approve of their government’s actions or not, can’t help but wonder if they’ll ever be able to feel safe in their country,



Where is
the
Promise of
Peace on
Earth?

the question, “Where is the promise of peace?” resounds.

Our Attempts to Create Peace

We try in all of these situations to create peace. We try to bring peace to our Christmas preparations by doing things like getting organized or by starting early. Parents try to get their kids to settle down by just giving them everything that they ask for. People seek to find relief from their fears and anxieties by ignoring them and hoping they’ll just go away on their own. Some think that the only solution to the war in Ukraine is to just give Putin what he wants. And people have been trying to create peace in the Levant for decades now.

But most of these plans, at best, seem able to produce a peace that is short lived. The best laid plans have a way of becoming overwhelmed. Children who become accustomed to getting whatever they want somehow never become less demanding or disruptive. Anxiety that is pushed down deep inside tends to slip back out in unexpected and ultimately destructive ways. You give Russia what it wants, and it will only want more. And, well, Israel and Palestine have defied the wisdom of the best peacemakers in the world for generations. We try and we try but where is the promise of peace?

God’s Speaks Peace

In response to that question, we have this morning our reading from the Book of Psalms: **“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.”** Yes, it says that, in those very moments when peace seems most elusive, it can be found because God will speak peace to his people.

That seems like a wonderful promise. But it does raise a few issues, doesn’t it? If God can speak and peace is created, why hasn’t God just done that? What is God waiting for?

2nd Peter’s Thinking

I actually think that our reading this morning from the Second Letter of Peter might help us to answer that question. The writer is not speaking directly about the promise of peace. He is speaking about the apparent delay in the return of Christ that the people are complaining about. But I think that his explanation applies to both promises: **“But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”**

This is saying that God does not experience time like we do and so can be infinitely patient in ways that we cannot even fathom. It is also saying that the patience of God is a good thing, even if we may not always experience it that way. And I think that all of that does apply to God’s promise of peace as well. You see, one of the real impediments to creating true peace in this world is our own haste. We are in too much of a hurry to get the sensation of peace now, and that prevents us from building the kind of peace that lasts.

When we Rush to Peace

And so, to give a simple example, when parents are desperate to get just a little bit of peace and quiet from their kids at this time of year, they may opt for the quick solution of giving them candy or some other thing to indulge them. And of course, it works in the short term. But wise parents learn

quickly that that short-term peace can lead to a much more turbulent situation in the longer term, especially if, for example, you load up your kid with so much sugar that they practically lose all control.

The wise parent knows that the real way to build a peaceful family is through character and relationship building for parent and child alike. That can be a lot of work and it may not always be comfortable, but it really is the only way to have peace that will last.

And that is how it is for so many other things. Building true and lasting peace takes risk, commitment and time. But we are always too tempted to take the shortcuts and that is a big part of our problem.

Paired Concepts

The psalm doesn't just promise that God will speak peace to his people. It also describes the process for creating such peace. **“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, And righteousness will look down from the sky.”** This is describing, one by one, those very concepts that are needed to heal our troubled world. We will not get anywhere unless we are able to do it with love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace. But notice how the author very poetically presents these notions. He presents them as pairs, pairs that are meeting one another and intimately embracing one another.

The message behind the intentional pairing of these words seems clear. You cannot have one of these things without the other. Love without faithfulness, can easily become self-indulgence. Faithfulness without righteousness can lead to supporting a person, a country or a company even if they are doing evil things. When we become focussed on promoting one thing, no matter how good, without taking the care to balance it with other good things, it can actually lead to an evil outcome.

Righteousness and Peace

And nowhere is that more important than in the central pair: **“Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”** Peace that is not established in a positive relationship – a kissing relationship – with righteousness will fail.

Let me explore what that is saying a bit. The word righteousness is one of those biblical words that people sometimes don't understand the full meaning of. For many people, that word righteousness doesn't really have the best of associations. For many of us, righteous people are simply people who think that they are better than everybody else because of some moral stance that they have taken.

Righteousness/Justice

But the Hebrew word that is used in that verse means so much more than that. The word that is used in that verse in Hebrew is צְדִיקָה (tsidqah) and it does not mean moral superiority or feeling as if you are better than other people. It means justice and not retributive justice when you get back at somebody who has hurt you. It refers to a situation where all things are in balance and where everyone gets a fair shake. It means righteousness in the sense that all the right things happen.

What that means is that whenever we rush towards peace and it doesn't work or it doesn't last, the reason is clear. We have tried to establish peace without justice. The two are not kissing each other. And peace cannot last without its romantic pair.

Lasting Peace

In your personal life, if you try to create peace by pushing all of the grief and the loss and the worries and fears deep down inside and you don't let them out, for example, that will not create lasting peace. You need to allow for what is right – for your fears and losses to be expressed and dealt with. The peace can only last when it is paired with what is right.

If you want to seek peace in your relationships, it is never going to be enough to establish that peace in isolation. Yes, you can decide to not talk about the differences that exist between you and the other person. You can act peaceful on the surface, but unless you are able to work through the points of contention and find a balance and judgement that is fair to all, you won't find lasting peace in your relationship. Peace and righteousness must kiss.

National and International Conflict

And, of course, this is nowhere truer than when you talk about national and international conflict. Again and again, nations have sought to impose peace through strength. They've created a situation where their army has such an overwhelming advantage in terms of arms or of sheer numbers, and they believe that that is what will pacify the people that they have colonized, occupied or invaded.

It often works in the short term. But it never works in the long term. Until you can address the deep issues of injustice, racism and exploitation, there will never be peace. It doesn't even matter how much an oppressed people are outgunned, the mere fact that they know that, no matter what they do, they cannot beat their oppressors, will only eventually lead them to the conclusion that, since they have nothing to lose, the only thing that they have left is the possibility of lashing out at their oppressors.

No Justification of Terrorism

None of this, in any way, should be taken to be a justification of those who resort to extreme tactics like terrorism or suicide bombing. These are absolutely deplorable acts and worthy of all condemnation. But condemnation and reprisal will not stop it from happening. That is a problem that we are all dealing with and that prevents true peace from being established in our world.

And so, on this second Sunday of Advent, let us indeed pray for peace on earth. The earth is sorely in need of it. But let us pray with some understanding that true peace, peace that lasts, is not an easy thing. I am thankful for a God who speaks peace to his people and I pray that all God's people will hear that voice. I pray that we understand that real peace will take some work and will take some change. Above all, I pray that we understand that it will only last when peace and righteousness kiss one another.