



Scripture & Sermon

December 6, 2020

Pastor Kelsey

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 NRSV

1 Lord, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin. Selah
8 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.
9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those
who fear him,

Isaiah 40:1-11 NRSV

1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's
hand
double for all her sins.
3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of
the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway
for our God.
4 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.
5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be
revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has
spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out!"

that his glory may dwell in our land.
10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each
other.
11 Faithfulness will spring up from the
ground,
and righteousness will look down from
the sky.
12 The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
13 Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of
the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows
upon it;
surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand
forever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

*Gracious and Peace-bringing God,
Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time
we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and
help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the
Son and Spirit, Amen.*

During the Advent and Christmas seasons we sing a lot about peace. In Hark the Herald we sing: "Peace on Earth and mercy mild..." In It Came Upon a Midnight Clear we sing: "still through the cloven skies they come//
With peaceful wings unfurled." In, Do You Hear What I Hear? We sing: "Pray for peace, people, everywhere." To be honest, I was expecting to find it used in more songs, as it is a theme that is so well infused into this season in my mind. I realized this week as I thought about our scriptures and Peace, that it is an idea that I have not spent much time thinking about or discovering the depth of. When I think of peace, I realize it can be an emotion, an adjective, or a status. We feel peace instead of strife, things are peaceful like a lake at dawn, and peace is the opposite of war like when a country is at peace. All of these uses of peace can be powerful for us as individuals and in the moment. But the way that the Bible talks about peace and the way we uphold it during this season, has made me think about what else it could mean. Could "Peace of earth and mercy mild" be about more than just a lack of war? Is God's peace that is shared with us more than just a simple pleasant feeling? Today's Psalm and passage from Isaiah bring some deeper meaning to the idea of peace.

I wanted to be sure that we also read the Psalm during worship today because it speaks a bit more directly about Peace. As it says in verse 8, "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." This sounds simple enough in English, but if we look at the original Hebrew, the word that is translated as "Peace" here, is "Shalom" in Hebrew. Shalom is likely a familiar word to you, but I didn't truly know what it meant either until I was taught about this week by a Biblical Scholar who particularly focuses on the Psalms. He shared that Shalom is more than just an absence of war or strife, but is a peace in which everyone has what they need and no one is left without. When someone wishes another shalom, it is a wish that they have enough and a claim that if there is anything that you need, that I have, it is yours. I love this idea of peace! It pulls together the various uses of the words in a powerful way for me. Peace as Shalom is still a state of being without war and strife, but adds a positive contribution, that it is not just the lack of strife, but the added state of everyone having what they need and no one being left out. It is this peace that God speaks to us. It is not just a wish for us to not fight or feel calm and good inside, but for those things to be felt by **everyone** because **everyone** can have peace because they have enough. This is a peace that is not just concerned about myself or if I can find it for me and mine, but a peace that relies on a community working together so they can all have peace. This is a radical peace that pushes us to look outside of ourselves, look to the "other" on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the world and recognize that none of us fully and truly have peace until all of us have it. That is a hefty goal, and I think we can all look around us, especially this year, and realize that if the ultimate goal of peace is that we all have it and we work together to find it together, then we are a FAR way off. This way of thinking about peace does not

mean that none of us experience any peace until we all have it, or that we should feel bad for feeling peace while knowing others do not have it. It means that when we read Luke 2:14 "on earth peace, good will to men," and think about living it out, that God's hope for true and all encompassing peace is founded on the idea that everyone has enough. What if this were the peace we wished each other when we pass the peace of Christ or send wishes of Christmas peace this season? How does this change the way you think about wishing another peace? It is not just a wish that things are calm and nice for them, but a true wish that they have enough of whatever it is they need, and a silent offer to them that you would like to help them get to that enough if they don't have it? Now, if you know how people work when they need things, you probably already know, that especially in our culture, it is unlikely that others will happily be forthcoming about where they have need and where they could use help. This is why we need to practice peace like the psalm guides us. I'll read verse 8 again, "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." Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people. We don't have to read each other's minds, and we shouldn't trust them to tell us all their needs, God speaks to us and guides us toward the ways that we can help bring about God's radical peace here on earth. We can look and listen for where God is calling us as a community and as individuals to help others get to a place of having true peace, of having enough. We can be co-cultivators of that peace, of that shalom, with God in our world, if we quiet ourselves and shift our focus from ourselves and our own lives to look outward, we will better be able to listen for God's word of peace.

This passage of Isaiah 40 does not say it is about peace, and by the usual definition of peace, it would be hard to find the thread. But, if we continue to think about Peace as this radical shalom, these verses have a bit more to say, particularly to those who are feeling like they do not have enough. Enough of anything we need, from food and shelter (material things) to emotion and spiritual needs. In the times that the long book of Isaiah was written, the Israelite people were experiencing the Babylonian Exile. They are forced out of their cities and away from the ways they were used to practicing their faith. They were convinced this experience was due to the punishment from God for all of their sinfulness. This is the word that God speaks to them in this moment of spiritual crisis. Now, this passage is actually some ancient poetry and I will be the first to admit, that even after multiple readings this week, I was struggling to figure out what this passage as a whole was trying to say. I am thankful for those who can help us figure these kinds of passages out. I listen to this podcast of biblical scholars to help think through our weekly passages, and one of the professors on that podcast shared that he also scratched his head at this passage for many years, until it finally clicked together for him. I didn't have those years to scratch my head in the last 7 days, so I am thankful for his conclusions. This is what he realized this passage could be saying. "You are still the cities of Judah even though you are currently in Babylon. You are still God's people even though you have been in exile for 40 years. God is coming to you across the desert, through the wilderness, God is coming to you in your exile, in your loneliness. This is the God of peace. This passage and so many others tell the story of where God is even when we feel God is far away. Our God is a God who does not give up on us no matter how much time has passed. Our God is a God who does the walking through the

desert or our wilderness to meet us in our loneliness. Our God is a God who invites us to join in God's work of peace building, in the work of making sure everyone has enough. Our God is a God who comes with might and strength, who can blow us all over like grass; yet our God is also a God who feeds his flock like a shepherd, gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them in his bosom, and gently leads the mother sheep. Our God is a God who wishes for the playing fields to be leveled out as described in verse 4: "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." This is not speaking of literal mountains and valleys. It is a levelling of people, and not in a socialism way, but that we prepare the way for the Lord, for Jesus, by resetting our relationships with each other and more importantly with God. Some of us are walking in a valley right now, feeling far from God and down in life. God's work and hope is to lift those of us down there into the light. Some of us may find ourselves on a mountaintop, feeling above others, feeling content in how we are living their faith, perhaps stuck in a routine. Though really, it is likely that we are all a bit of both, in a valley in some areas of our life and on a mountaintop in others. God's work and hope is to encourage us to share what we have on the mountain top with those who have a valley in that area. This levelling of the mountains and the valleys is a metaphor for God's radical hope for shalom peace for all. God guides us toward living the way God sees us all, as equal children of God. God's hope is that we share in all we have, willing to lose our best seats in the house on the mountain top to help those in the valley get up to ground level. Part of this work is realizing that we all have areas of need and most have some kind of area of surplus that we can share. We are not divided into groups in the world as "needers" and "givers." We all are both, though at different parts of our lives we may be more one than the other. Part of what God is calling us to recognize is that we are all both and we all need the peace of the level plain, whether right now we need to give some or get some to get to that plain.

This work of bringing about radical peace and levelling the plain is important, because this is the work we do to prepare the way for Christ. In verse 3 of Isaiah 40, it says, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Leading us right into verse four that I read a minute ago, "every valley shall be lifted up....etc" Advent is particularly a time for us to "prepare the way" for Christ and for the Kingdom of God among us. This is a specific time for us to recognize where we need to prepare our hearts to be a level highway for God, but also for us to intentionally look around us and recognize how we can help fill in others' valleys with our extra mountain dirt. This is partly what the generosity of the season is supposed to be about. Looking around and literally using our extra material goods or finances to pour into someone else where they have need. It is also partly what we should be taking away from this season into the way we live the rest of the year. Both of these goals for the season are possible for us to do from afar, but God calls us to invest deeper and not just toss out charity when it's easy. God calls us to follow God's model and be in relationship with people so we can be together on the level plain and not just as distant, but now all on sea level. God models for us the relationship goal as described in verse 11: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." God does not chuck sheep feed

at the flock from the mountaintop and hope that that fills all the care they need. God feeds the flock, gathering them near and carries them with him, gently leading those he doesn't carry. Just as God cares for all of us in God's flock, we are to care for each other in the flock. Feeding each other with care and gathering closely (during these times, that is a figurative ask).

May we all find the Peace of Advent. Yes, the peace of no strife, the peace of feeling calm and good, and the peace of a serene nature view. But this year has had a couple extra doses of strife, so we need some extra hefty peace. So, let us strive for the peace of Psalm 85 and Isaiah 40. Peace of shalom, peace of everyone having all that they need and no one left without. Peace of those with mountaintops sharing with those with valleys to join together on the level plain, preparing the way for Jesus among us.

Let us pray.

Lord, in the midst of our busy time, when we are in the rush to Christmas, you burst into our lives with the tantalizing promise of something new. Open our hearts and spirits to the glorious possibilities of hope and peace to come. Help us to prepare our lives to receive you. We thank you for all the blessings you pour on us and for the privilege we have in sharing these blessings with others. As the voice cried out in the wilderness, God, you enter our lives and call to us to be open to hearing the cries of people who feel lost and alienated, who feel that no one cares or ever will care about them. We have been given that opportunity to reach out through the ministries and mission of our church bringing hope and peace to all. Get us ready to become pathways of peace and life-transforming love in your name. It is in the spirit of Jesus' name that we pray. AMEN.