

A SONG OF PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-9

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There's peace, and then there's peace.

There's a peace that comes from an absence of conflict. A quiet in the house that is prompted by one member of the household screaming, "I need some peace and quiet and I need it now!"

And then there's the kind of peace that comes when conflict has been resolved. No tension in the home anymore, because the dispute has been mediated and all parties feel that they've been heard. That is deep contentment.

There's peace and then there's peace.

There's the peace of mind that you experience when you've decided to stop thinking about your problems. You have, for the moment, successfully swept them under the rug. You numb your mind with TV or computer games or a couple of drinks.

And then there's the peace of mind that comes when you have looked at each of the problems in your life, head-on. As you look at each one, you say to yourself the serenity prayer, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." You tackle the problems you need to address. You let go of those that are out of your control.

There's peace, and then there's peace.

The middle of the night is, in some ways, a peaceful time. Unless you're working the night shift, or are parenting a young child, no one expects you to work, be productive, do anything. The night is for rest, a time to restore both mind and body. Yet

sometimes you find yourself awake. In that moment between sleep and consciousness, your mind sorts through your thoughts. If something bad has happened in your life recently, you remember that, with a jolt. Your mind sorts through all recent events. “Is there anything I have to be worried about?” Like flipping through the channels, you see in your mind’s eye the people you love, you see situations at work, you’re aware of items on your to-do list you have yet to accomplish. And sometimes your mind will tune into one of these areas, you’ll obsess about it. You may fall asleep and dream about it. Or it may keep you up the rest of the night, your mind unable to turn off the TV or switch the channel because you realize how worried you are about one of your children, a problem at work, a bill you don’t know how you’ll pay, a call you’re expecting from the doctor’s office. And then you panic knowing how tired you’ll be the next day after a night of not sleeping well. And then it’s even harder to get back to sleep.

It happens to me. The clock says 2:30. My mind is back at my desk at church, remembering the work that is piling up. Or my mind goes here, in the sanctuary. I think about the absence of someone I haven’t seen in a while. Where are they? Is everything ok with them? Or I think about a face I saw the past Sunday and some worry I noticed on that face. What was the cause of it? I think about something unkind I said, or something kind I neglected to say. I

This particular night, a few weeks ago, I woke up several times. I was fighting a cold, having trouble breathing. A sip of water, a cough drop, I would doze and then wake up again. And I was aware of my mind flipping through the channels of my life. And on that night, as I saw each person in my life, each situation, I had a feeling of peace about each one. Not that there aren’t worries, not that there isn’t plenty to do.

But I felt, as the medieval writer Julian of Norwich said, "All will be well." I was able to be awake without feeling panicked.

What kind of peace does God want for our lives?

We can pretend to be at peace. Turn off the news altogether. Ignore the suffering of the world around us, whether the loneliness or the violence, but is that what God means by peace?

In our scripture for today, the prophet Isaiah tells us of God's dream for the world. He paints a picture of extreme peacefulness. It's meant to be an exaggeration, so as to engage our imaginations, to help us, too, to dream. How peaceful does God want the world to be? So peaceful that animals who naturally hunt one another will play together instead. So peaceful that parents don't need to worry about their children being hurt by a poisonous snake. Don't take this scene literally, but take it seriously - as a glimpse into the mind and heart of God. God wants us to experience peace, peace within ourselves, our families, our communities - peace among all people. The Hebrew word is "shalom", a better, more all-encompassing word which means not just the absence of conflict but the presence of wholeness and healing.

These words from Isaiah come from a place of deep despair. Israel was living through what has been called the first holocaust of the Jews. Five times in a 40 year period, the Assyrian army stampeded through the hill country of Israel working terror and destruction wherever it went. Their nation was ravaged, every family included victims of war. From this moment in time, Isaiah says, "Even though the world has become a living nightmare, even though there is no sign anywhere that peace will ever come, even though human greed and destructiveness are running rampant across our

world, I still believe that the promise of God is more powerful than the destructiveness of humanity."

His prophecy begins with these words, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse." It's a symbol. Something green, something new, something alive will grow where you thought there was no chance of anything growing. You've cut down a tree. that tree is now dead. It's a stump, stumps don't grow. But look more closely, Isaiah says to us. Look at what you thought was dead and hopeless, and you will see some signs of life. They may be small and fragile, but they are signs of life nonetheless.

And not just any stump, but the stump of Jesse...Jesse, who was the father of King David...a sign of hope will come from one of the ancestors of David. 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah told his people, "The Messiah will come. God will not abandon us."

When we read the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke, we find this information: "Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, in the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David." Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph. Joseph was a direct descendant of King David. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. Something new and green and alive entered the world in the form of a baby, the one we call the prince of peace.

And this is how peace enters our lives and our world, in baby steps, in improbable ways. I've seen it happen. I've seen people make peace with each other. People who were once enemies who begin to see the other as a human being. I've seen people who were once tormented by guilt finally forgive themselves and

experience inner peace. I've seen it happen, right here in this room: siblings who had not spoken to each other in years take one small step towards reconciliation at a parent's funeral. There are parents and children who cannot forgive each other for hurts and wounds who one day find the courage to pick up the phone, and in that moment, the candle of peace shines a little brighter.

These are small steps, you could say. But Isaiah says it will happen this way. New life will occur where no one thought it possible. You know how sometimes a plant will push through a crack in the sidewalk, and if you had to put money on it, you'd bet it all that the concrete would be stronger than a plant, but one day you see that the plant has made it all the way through, aiming right towards the sunlight...

Believe it. There is something better coming FOR us, something better coming FROM us, if we will only keep dreaming. A shoot from a dead stump. A smile from a long frozen face. A light that shines in the darkness. A step into a church after years of hurt. A little baby crying in a manger. Signs of peace in our world.