

“The Way of Peace”
Isaiah 59:8-9; Psalm 34:11-14;
Romans 3:9-19; Luke 1:67-80

December 10, 2017
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

*'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds
While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads.*

I would guess that almost all of us know the beginning of this poem or have heard it somewhere. It's that wonderful poem that comes up so often in the Christmas season and it was that idea of sugar plums dancing, that vision the children had while they were sleeping, that hope of what was coming that stands out for me. I was struck by that idea of having a vision of what was coming.

I was wondering as we enter into Advent and move toward Christmas, what is our vision of what is coming? What are the visions that are dancing in our heads? Is it all sugar plums? Probably not. Yet, perhaps we have a vision of celebration together—a time when we gather around a table or gather around a tree to celebrate. So there's that vision of celebration that may be with us. Some may be thinking more about presents and the giving of presents in the hope of how they will be received. Yet, there is this greater vision that I've been wondering about. As we come into Advent, it feels like this time of year invites us to wait and think about a vision, to wonder about what God's vision is for us and what vision we may join.

As we read the scriptures this morning, I think there's a vision presented. If you read them directly, they may seem a little on the negative side, but underneath that there is a vision for what they are about. Perhaps the Psalm was the one that presented it the most clearly with a question. Who has a desire for life and wants to enjoy the days of good? That's the vision of the Psalm. I think underneath Isaiah's vision is the idea that if we just knew peace and lived in peace, that's his vision for what it's all about. Then if we read Romans, underneath it is this idea that if we just sought God and lived in peace, we would know God. Even Zechariah, in the Gospel reading, is thinking forward about what God will do to guide our way, to be our savior, and to lead us into the way of peace. There is a vision there that undergirds those prophets as they speak.

So as we allow that to be a vision that's forming and we remember the biblical vision offered us, I want to think about what this season has to do with attaining that vision.

Yesterday was my final day of spiritual direction training. While we were there, we got in a circle and we did an exercise where we said one thing we appreciated about or something that was good about a person, and then one area we thought might be a growing edge for the person. I wonder if the scripture isn't pointing to some growing

edges. As it does that, in each one there is a sense that there is some kind of struggle going on, but there's an opportunity as well.

The struggle that's going on in the Psalm is don't do evil. Don't speak deceitfully. Seek God. Pursue God and pursue peace. In Isaiah, he's saying, "Where is justice?" He's talking about the crooked way of his time. It's interesting that the idea of crookedness is the idea of twisting what's good. That word in Hebrew for the crooked way has that idea behind it—what has been straight and good has been changed and been made crooked. The idea of evil in the New Testament is the same thing—the good is twisted. Isaiah is saying the people of his time have taken what is good and twisted it slightly and in doing so have lost out. There is no justice. Justice is far from us. Righteousness does not reach us. He's recognizing in that a gloom, a darkness.

Romans, then, is really fairly gloomy. There's no righteousness. There's no understanding. There's no seeking God. There's no kindness. It's a description of Paul's time and what he sees. If there's no justice, no righteousness, no seeking God, no kindness, what a terrible kind of vision that is. But it's a vision of what he feels is present, at least in his time.

I think that Zechariah is, again, recognizing his own time and how in his time there is a sense of need, a sense of oppression, a sense of needing to be saved, to be healed. They are sitting in darkness, and under the shadow of death, but there is light coming.

So in many ways, when I think about reading all these different scriptures it's a little bit like being confronted by the Ghost of Christmas Past and the Ghost of Christmas Present, and even a little bit of the Ghost of Christmas Future because it's all these visions of the way things are wrong. What it feels like is that we can have the same response Scrooge had. Is there still time for things to change and how does that happen?

The story of Scrooge is in some ways instructive because there are two ways it happens. One is, he gets down and prays, "Is there still time?" He seems to get the answer, "Yes, if you take off and do things now." That is what he does, and he changes the nature of Christmas Present through his actions.

As we are in Advent, there will be a time when we will also be engaged and invited to take that action. But I think there's another step for us. That first step. That step of prayer. That step of remembering. That step of noticing what God is doing. Because in each of the scriptures that we read, part of the issue is the idea of seeking God, of recognizing what God is doing, of being aware of God's salvation work and where God would lead us. It is noticing there is a light shining; there is the presence of God with us.

The struggle is about not forgetting the promises and not hearing the encouragement again. It is about demoting Jesus' birth to simply being another thing we celebrate as having happened instead of something that is happening, something

that is continuing to come into our lives. We can allow God to enter again into our lives through Jesus, and recognize that he is the light and his light shows us the path. We can continue to turn to that light and recognize God's grace and be part of it.

Sometimes it's good to take a step back to think about what I don't understand. So much of my life is trying to get something done. Advent is a time to step back and look at where the light is shining, to remember how Christ is guiding, to remember the nature of God's love among us, to wonder how kindness might be reborn. Is our time different than any of these scriptures? Do we struggle with any darkness, any divisions, any conflicts, any ways where deceit is present? Are we able to keep our voices from being voices of deceit? Are we able to shun evil and pursue the good? How do we allow God's light in Jesus Christ to shine again into our lives?

One way is to take a moment to wait, and look, and listen because God is present. God's light is among us. God does illumine a path. We are invited to pay attention and to recognize that God will lead our feet on the way of peace as we follow him. It is indeed the idea that as we pay attention to him, as we follow him, not only do we have a path, but we have a table and the two are related because the path, in some ways, leads to the table and then leads from the table. It is an invitation to come together as a people of faith and to recognize that God's light is shining among us and is with us and will sustain us, and then to take that light with us, take the sustaining grace of God with us. We wait in the presence of God's light and see the way that God will lead us.

It is in the season of Advent where we are awaiting a new beginning. We are beginning to let that light shine into our lives and show us God's way. As we seek God and pursue him, as we shun evil and do good, God will lead us into the way of peace. Amen.