

“Peace”

Isaiah 32:1. 16-18; Isaiah 57:1-5, 19-21;  
Romans 5:17-19; Ephesians 2:17-22;  
Luke 2:8-14

December 8, 2019  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

When we think about the definition of Advent, we often think of a beginning. But another definition is “to come into.” There’s a sense of us coming into God’s coming even as God is coming into our world. As we think through the words that we often use to guide us through this time, we may recognize Advent is the process of God coming into our lives. Today’s word is “peace.” As I think about the word “peace,” I often am wondering how I might have more peace in my life through all the busyness and activities and opportunities that present themselves. Sometimes I think maybe I just need to go away and sit by a mountain lake and feel the tranquility for a while. Yet, peace is more than that.

Sometimes I wonder if peace is possible and what peace really is. If we look, the Old Testament word for peace is *shalom*. The word can be used as a greeting because it’s a way of saying, “I would like you to be healthy and well.” There’s a sense of being complete, healthy, or whole that comes with it. It’s that kind of peace. It’s not necessarily the peace of sitting by a mountain lake, but a peace that creates a well-being, a wholeness, a togetherness.

Really, the Greek word, *eiréné*, comes from a root that suggests being knit together or made whole once again, joined in a way that completes something. The image that comes to mind is a big puzzle. When you put that final piece in to complete it, there’s a sense of peace. But there are also those times when things come together. When a good piece of music comes together, when you’re in a choir you feel a sense of harmony and there’s the peace that comes with that. It’s an active joining together.

One of the passages we read today (Isaiah 32:17) talks in parallel about the idea that God brings peace, and then goes on to say God brings secure dwelling places. There’s a sense of security (trust) and calm (quietness) in parallel with the word peace, implying that peace has both of those. The security is really more of trust in one’s situation, so when one feels trust, one can have a sense of calm.

In World War II, there was a poster that was put out for the British in the midst of being bombed. It said, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Maybe if somebody in authority suggests that, we might be able to do that to some extent, but for the most part, just telling me to be calm and carry on doesn’t always work for me. That’s a little bit the way I feel about trying to be peaceful. I can’t always get there on my own. I can’t simply be calm and carry on. One reason may be that I need to recognize what’s in the way. What are the problems with my own peacefulness?

In Isaiah 57:17, which we read today, it points to the human problem and it calls it wicked covetousness. The interesting thing about “wicked covetousness” is that it’s not

even the nice covetousness that's in the Ten Commandments. In the Ten Commandments, it tells us to watch out for our desires when we really like something someone else has. This covetousness that's being talked about in Isaiah is not simply the desire for something, it's the greed that is already taking place that makes one try to gain something. If I defraud somebody to get what I want, that's the kind of description this covetousness is, and adding the wickedness makes it even worse.

I am always taken aback by the idea that it's so easy for us to move from wanting something into trying to get something in a way that's going to hurt other people. It's not that there aren't examples. All you have to do is look at some of the worst stories about Black Friday. People taking things out of other people's carts. People taking things out of people's hands. People getting in fights. The security guard going to the front of the store gets punched because somebody thinks he's cutting in line. In some ways, that kind of description is the description of wicked covetousness, but it's not just individuals. It's not just in our own ways of doing things.

Sometimes we join together to do things for our own benefit in ways that cause incredible problems. It doesn't take long to find examples when we begin to look. We have an opioid crisis in the United States, partly a result of a corporation that wanted to sell a lot of product, and their product was opioids. Wells Fargo created accounts for people without even telling people that they created accounts for them, so they could make more money. Volkswagen cheating on its exhaust testing results so they could look better. Enron, etc. You could keep finding examples of wicked covetousness. It's greed that has moved to the point of fraud and perhaps even to violence causing death.

I've always struggled with why the angels announced, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth..." which used to end with, "Good will to men," but people decided that the translation really wasn't that accurate. It's really, "To those whom he favors," or "To those with whom God is pleased." When I was reading the Isaiah 57 passage, at the end of it, it says, "There is no peace for the wicked." What it suggests is that as we look forward to the Prince of Peace coming among us, it's both God coming into our lives and our invitation to come into relationship with God and in doing so, to remember that what God cares about is that we're not wicked, that we actually try to do things that make for peace.

For me, the word that continually pops up out of scripture is righteousness. God invites us to think about what it means to be in right relationship with one another. I think if we took the time to look at what that word might mean, there are different places, particularly in the New Testament that I could pull out. Second Corinthians 6:7: blamelessness, wisdom, patience, kindness, genuine love, truthfulness. The Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, humility, gentleness, and self-control. We know what righteousness means, what right relationship means, or what healthy relationship means as guided by scripture.

So, when we hear about the Prince of Peace coming, it's about that Prince of Peace coming to lead us into ways of being. He's inviting us on the way of peace. Indeed, in

Isaiah 32 it says, “The effect of righteousness is peace and the result of righteousness is calm and security.” It’s a coming into from both directions—our coming into the faith that leads us to live in particular ways and to think about our relationships with one another and with God, and God coming into our lives to help us see more clearly.

How would it be different if on Black Friday everybody tried to allow the fruits of the Spirit to be what are seen when they went shopping? What would it be like if we tried to live our lives according to those gifts? In our world it feels like it’s not encouraged, so where do we begin? In one of the Isaiah passages Isaiah said it’s about being contrite and humble. Our world seems to be so different than that. How often do we hold up the person who’s contrite and celebrate them? Or the person who’s humble? Today it feels like you’re supposed to self-promote and never say you’re sorry. In doing so, I wonder if we lose the ability to hear, to see, to follow the very Prince of Peace we celebrate. In scripture, we are invited to be contrite and humble, to know our own faults and foibles, and to recognize our own limits and limitations. We are invited to come contrite and humble so that we can learn what it means to be righteous, and in doing so, to pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.

I think the table, the Lord’s Supper, is one of those places that we are reminded that we can’t be calm and carry on all by ourselves. It is by God’s grace that we are sustained, that we are brought into a family of faith, a place of love and grace, a place of hope and promise, a promise of peace. We gather together around the table, where God puts our sin behind us and our life ahead of us. It is then that we can begin to come into the place of peace, the peace of God that goes beyond all understanding. Amen.