

December 19, 2021

**“Where There is No Peace”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Micah 5:2–5a

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*But God shall give them over to their enemies
until the time when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of the ruler’s sisters and brothers shall return
to the Children of Israel.*

*The ruler will rise up Shepherd them in the strength of YHWH,
by the power of the name of YHWH their God.*

*They will live in security, for now the ruler’s greatness will reach to the ends os of the earth.
They’ll say, “This at last is the one who will be our peace!”*

Luke 1:46b–55

*“My soul magnifies your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you my savior,
for you have looked with favor on the lowliness of your servants.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for you have done great things for me,
and holy is your name.*

Your mercy is for those who are in awe of you from generation to generation.

*You have shown strength with your arm;
and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*You have brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

*you have filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy—

the promise you made to our ancestors—to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants forever.”

Sermon “Where There is No Peace”

Peace, the word “peace” is one of those complicated words that can mean a hundred different things and is envisioned and felt by people in a myriad of ways. Even back in Mary’s time and further back in the prophet Micah’s time the words used for peace were complex. When words are as layered as this we should always think about the context in which they were written and the person who is using the word.

In the Micah text the word is Shalom, which you might remember can be interpreted as wholeness, completeness, restored or healed, not just the absence of war and conflict.

A little trick I learned is that if the lectionary cuts off a text in the middle of the verse, like these texts do, you should always proceed with some suspicion. In the gospel reading it appears to just be a time saver, but often, like the text from Micah this morning it is about protecting a narrative. Because in the Micah reading if we read it, as is in the lectionary and through our Christian lens we will probably hear it as a prediction of Jesus. Certainly appropriate for this time of year right?

But if you read the rest of the sentence you see that Micah is referring to oppression and war with the Assyrian empire in his time. And the “one” he is referring to was King Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah. In Hebrew, Hezekiah means the “Prince of Peace” and “Wonderful Counselor.” Hezekiah became the King of the Jews, he was anointed, and there was fairness, justice, healing, prosperity and peace in the land for many years.

So the concept of shalom in Micah is more likely about the absence of oppression and the healing of his land. My point is that when you think of peace, it is not just a lovely feeling we get when it is well with our soul, neither is it only the absence of war. “Peace” is peace in our land, healing in our land, prosperity and fulfillment and as always in scripture, shalom is inextricably linked with justice. Not justice like we think of it now in terms of crime and punishment but God’s justice.

South African Bishop Desmond Tutu said this so well in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize during the times of apartheid in South Africa, he courageously said “There is no peace because there is no justice. There can be no real peace and security until there is first justice enjoyed by all the inhabitants of our beautiful land.”

He continued, “The Bible knows nothing about peace without justice, the prophet wrote they are crying ‘peace, peace, where there is no peace.’ God’s Shalom, peace, inevitably involves righteousness, justice, wholeness, fullness of life, participation in decision-making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, sharing and reconciliation.”

We miss the power in Micah’s words if we just interpret this passage as a prediction of Jesus’s birth. We miss that peace is often a much bigger word, and the linkage of justice to peace is a theme that runs through both the Jewish and Christian narratives.

The fact remains however, that Jesus was born in a time that was very similar to the time of Assyrian’s oppression of the Jews except you just change the name of the empire to the Roman Empire. He was born in a time when his country needed hope, needed to believe that God would bring about a great change and restore peace.

And as per usual for our God, the narrative tells us that the way a miracle comes to Earth is in the most unexpected, upside down, and unpredictable way. God incarnates not as a mighty king but as the most vulnerable kind of human there is, a dependent baby, born in a lowly manger in a rinky dink town.

Jesus did not bring about peace in his lifetime but he sowed the seeds for peace, his words, some inculcated in scriptures are capable of inspiring peace for the world, by meeting the needs of all God's people, by healing of the sick, making people feel whole with words of forgiveness, by feeding of the hungry, giving voice to the unheard and toppling empires that seek to rule without justice for all it's people.

Two thousand years later we have yet to fully manifest those words or that ideal of Shalom. As Americans we come close with our democracy but have yet to understand that "liberty and justice for all" part. But we do have the absence of war right? Hmm... yes and yet our children often have to learn to hide like they are at war at school, while bully parents dominate school board meetings with their agendas not addressing how to protect our kids.

Also half of our citizens fear the police like they would in a non-democratic, or authoritarian system, and we are at war with a virus and failing because of our battle with truth telling. Burnt out medical workers are preparing for the next wave without the support of half of our community using our full arsenal of weapons against it. Many children go to bed hungry or afraid of the violence in their homes and on their streets.

We have yet to incarnate completely the teachings of Jesus in humanity or in our land. That's exhausting and not uplifting to think about especially at Christmas time but in the words of our closing song we will sing about peace "let it begin with me." That can help us feel like it is a little less overwhelming.

Though peace, shalom, is a huge and complicated word that can have philosophical, ethical, and political implications it also does encompass that deeply personal space within us that our faith can help us to cultivate.

We saw this in Jesus, he would be out there healing and feeding and loving and speaking out against injustice and religious hypocrisy but then he would need to retreat. Retreat to prayer and meditation, sometimes for just a little while, sometimes for days. We have to cultivate peace within ourselves in order to be effective at cultivating it in the world around us.

But that takes some effort, and making ourselves vulnerable like our story tells us God did. It takes making time with God, it means not denying any heartbreak or trauma that we carry around with us because inevitably we will pass on that pain to others if we don't tend to it. It takes being in constant conversation with God so God can heal any residual isms or phobias.

It takes allowing time for our grief, so we have room in ourselves for the rise of our peace and the hope of our next chapter. It takes truth telling to ourselves and others so that we can be our most authentic self and know peace within our hearts and wish for and work for peace and justice for everyone, everywhere.

May we feel that hope for peace again with the coming of Christmas. May you find peace reborn in your hearts and homes and may your celebration be full of the meaning behind all of these candles. Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. AMEN

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