

Advent 2 Communion Meditation (Peace)
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
December 5, 2021

Isaiah 40:1-5; Philippians 1:3-11

Hope, peace, joy, and love... four small words with such big meanings. There's a reason they come up again every year for us as cherished themes in Advent. These are not just concepts or ideas we think about; they are experiences at the core of what it means to be human and in relationship with others and our Creator.

Hope (which was last week's theme) can be defined as the expectation of a good future that is awakened by God's promise and strengthened by our trust in God. We can have hope that everything will end up well, even if we're not really sure how in the moment. And if we don't feel particularly hopeful, it is something that we can try to cultivate in our lives through deliberate practice.

I think that's the same way with peace, our theme for today in the second week of Advent. Peace, wellbeing, wholeness has its source in God, but we are responsible for our part in manifesting it here on earth. That's why I think these two selections from the Bible go so well together. The verses from Isaiah say a lot about God's work of peace, and the verses from Philippians say a lot about what peace can look like within relationships.

In the Old Testament, peace, or shalom, is a great way to describe God's dream for the world. Our ancient stories indicate that what God wants is for all of creation to flourish together. But humanity does all kinds of things to disrupt that, historically rejecting God's plan for compassionate justice.

We see this over and over again... our ancient ancestors make deliberate choices to stop living in God's compassionate justice, and then they lose their footing in the promised land. But not forever. Because even though they were sent away, God's desire was always for them to come to their senses, be restored, and return. That's their story.

The experience of humanity is that each of us individually and all of us together make choices that break up God's wholeness. And God allows each of us and all of us to experience the consequences of that brokenness. But

not forever. God's plan is to one day put everything back together, to restore the whole creation, to make everything new.

Listen again to Isaiah 40 verses 4 and 5. *"Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low: the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places smooth. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."* This is not just about terrain; this is about the state of the world, and evening everything out. Valleys come up and mountains come down and everything meets in the middle, and everyone together sees God's glory.

This is not only a vision of the ancient people coming home, it's a vision of God restoring a world where everyone will have what they need; everyone will be treated equitably according to their situation; no one will be left out; and everyone will have a full experience of God, instead of the limited experiences that separate us. That's the kind of wholeness, the kind of peace, that will show God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

It's a lovely vision, but can and will God really do it? The prophet Isaiah continues with the affirmation, *"Here is your God. The sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him."* But then the image switches: *"He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart."* God is strong enough and cares enough to fulfill God's promises.

Now what is sometimes hard for us to grasp is that these promises apply to the whole world AND that they are not a guarantee of our own personal health and wealth. God can be powerful and loving, strong and kind, and we can still experience individual suffering.

Friends, this is a mystery of our faith. It bothers us particularly as Americans in the 21st century because we have such an individualized mindset. In other times and other cultures, people have not wrestled with the question of a loving God and individual suffering as much as we do because they thought at a community level and we are prone to thinking at an individual level.

Now that doesn't mean one way of thinking is right and one is wrong. But I want you to know that the Bible was written originally for people who thought at a community level so some of the answers we want just aren't in there.

What the scripture does give us consistently are principles for faithful living, both for individuals and for communities. And that's what we find in this

morning's verses from Philippians. These opening verses, centered in love and affection, were written to a community, but they are also good guides for us how to treat each other.

Later on, Paul will write encouraging words to them about the peace of God that guards and accompanies them. Regardless of how chaotic the world is, regardless of how much we are individually suffering, there is always something to be grateful for. And because we are grounded in stories of how God has provided in the past, both for us and for others, we can trust that God will make a way again. When we practice gratitude and practice asking for what we need, the peace of God guards us.

He also tells them, "the God of peace will be with us." This happens when we deliberately focus our thoughts on goodness. We are encouraged to dwell on what is good and noble, right and pure, lovely and admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Regardless of how chaotic the world is, regardless of how much we are suffering, we can choose where we direct our thoughts and energy. When we carefully, logically, reasonably focus our mind on God's goodness, the God of peace accompanies us.

This is how we cultivate peace, and how we grow in spiritual maturity. It doesn't happen by accident, Jesus invites into something more than that. Spiritual maturity comes from deliberately cultivating hope and peace and joy and love in our lives. As we deliberately cultivate wholeness in our lives, we become more in tune with the ways that God wants to use us to heal the brokenness in the world, so that we may set more place settings at the welcome table.

And that's the ultimate goal. God is already up to something in the world and we have the very great opportunity and privilege of joining in. God wants to bless the whole world with hope and peace and joy and love, and God wants to do that through us.

Jesus came to show the world what God is like, and the Church exists to continue that demonstration, to literally keep being Jesus in the world. So let us cultivate the gifts of Advent in our lives so that through us Jesus shows up every day and not just in December. Amen.