

ADVENT 2--THE ANSWER TO DARKNESS IS PEACE

(12/05/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Galatians 5:22-26
1 Corinthians 14:33
John 20:19-22

“God is a God not of disorder but of peace.” (1 Corinthians 14:33)

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. The first Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of hope and reflected on the gift of hope that entered the world two thousand years ago in Jesus of Nazareth. As the words of our opening hymn remind us, Jesus was “long-expected” by his people. The Israelites of Jesus’ day had been longing for his birth. They needed someone to lead them out of bondage to the Romans, just as Moses had led his people out of bondage to the Egyptians fifteen hundred years earlier. Though the Israelites of Jesus’ day may not have realized it, they also needed someone to lead them out of bondage to a legalistic religion and into the freedom that comes to those who place Jesus in the center of their life.

The candle of hope, which we lit last week, symbolizes one of the powerful themes of Advent and Christmas. A Christian lives his/her life with hope. A Christian’s faith finds expression in hope, even in the darkest times, because the Christian is aware of God’s presence in the world. As I mentioned last week, the Reverend Desmond Tutu, who knows something about the darkness of prejudice and hate, tells us, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” If we have hope, we know that wherever we go in this life and whatever befalls us, we are never beyond the reach of God’s love and care. Christian hope is not founded on wishing, but on an awareness of presence. As Desmond Tutu tells us, hope helps us see, to see deeper, to see the light—even, or especially in times of darkness.

This morning, David and Barbara Crane lit the second of our Advent candles, the candle of peace. We proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Prince of Peace. We pray that a peace grounded in justice will come to our world. We pray that a sense of inner peace will come to us as individuals. Individually and collectively, we long for what Jesus called the “peace that passes all understanding.” We long for that deep experience of peace that will heal or remove or counter or serve as an antidote to the darkness that is sweeping across our land and across the world, the hate that has the power to poison not only our communities but also our souls.

Several weeks ago, I saw a bumper sticker that I liked. The bumper sticker called us to:

Fight hate!

Teach tolerance!

Promote diversity!

I like the sentiment expressed in this bumper sticker. We need to teach tolerance to our children. We need to promote diversity in its many forms in our schools and in our communities. However, I am just not sure about the call to “fight” hate. There is something about declaring war on hate that doesn’t sit well with me. It’s sort of like “fighting fire with fire.” I have never been able to understand that approach; it makes more sense to fight fire with water or by cutting off the oxygen or fuel supply that feeds the fire. We need to *heal* our fear; we need to heal or ameliorate the darkness that leads to hate, and we can do it with hope, peace, joy, love, and light. I believe that this response to hate is more in keeping with the true spirit of Christmas.

As we heard in our gospel lesson this morning, when Jesus, immediately following his resurrection meets his disciples in the Upper Room, what does he say? He says, “Peace be with you.” His presence brings an experience of peace that calms their anxieties, that lifts the darkness of their depression. The peace that he shares with them provides them with a grounding for their apostleship, for their ministry in the world. He tells them,

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (Jn. 20:20-23)

It is clear from this passage that Jesus’ presence as the resurrected Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, brings that special kind of peace that leads not to contentment but to apostleship, that leads us not to passivity but to engage the world, to engage life in a loving, healing, reconciling way.

The peace that Jesus both promises and offers is elusive; it has a tendency to slip from our grasp. I see more fear than peace when I look at what is going on in the world. So often it appears that what is behind the ubiquitous hate that is spreading across our nation and our planet is fear. Fear leads us to do strange things. It gives rise to, or finds expression in hurtful and destructive thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.

When we see someone who hates, e.g., hates the members of certain groups, we don’t have to look very deeply to find the cause. Nancy Gibbs, the former Editor-in-Chief of *Time* magazine, is one of my favorite columnists. I suppose this can at least partially be attributed to the fact that I agree with everything she says, and I always learn something when I read her columns. In a past issue of *Time*, Ms. Gibbs said,

Hate, among all our base instincts, is the most distinctly human. In animals, violence and venom are tools of survival; in humans, [violence and venom are] the tools of supremacy. Small, scared people hate, self-hating people hate, bullied and betrayed people hate, as though hate will make them large and safe and strong.

I totally agree.

There are more than enough examples of hate in the daily newspaper. I think of the mass shooting that took place at the high school in Oxford Township, Michigan, just north of Detroit, this past Tuesday. A fifteen-year-old high school sophomore opened fire with a semi-automatic handgun that was given to him as a present by his parents, killing four fellow students and wounding seven other people, including at least one teacher.

As far as I know, a clear motive has not yet been determined. We can only speculate as to what was going on inside this young man's mind, what led him to act out his anger in such a cold, heartless, unfeeling, and cruel way, ending lives that were still emerging, bringing tremendous pain and sorrow to so many families. I'm not even sure that he knows why he did what he did.

Of course, I also wonder about parents who would give such a gift to an emotionally unstable teenager, who would not lock up the gun, put a locked guard around the trigger, and lock up the ammunition in a separate place. When the administration at the young man's school notified the parents that they were concerned to learn that he was trying to purchase ammunition, his mother purportedly texted her son, "LOL—next time don't let them catch you."

I have the feeling that many of our young people (and also many adults) feel relatively powerless. They lack a healthy connection with life, a healthy connection with community, and a clear, realistic, obtainable path to a successful future. They also lack a solid grounding in a religion, a healthy spirituality that provides them with a moral code. This, by the way, involves more than official membership in a church/synagogue/mosque/temple. The possession of a gun, especially an automatic pistol or rifle, makes them feel powerful. They can strike back at those classmates that have bullied them, or they can just act out their fear, their insecurities, their hatred on anyone who gets in their way. They have found a way to "make a name for themselves." With adults, many seem to identify with the warrior archetype; they find an identity as warriors in the service of a noble, sometimes even a religious cause. I see no other way to understand the random, drive-by shootings that take place in so many cities. And no, I do not think that the more guns we and our children have, the safer we are.

What I find particularly troubling is the hate that finds expression in social media. When I try to understand what this is all about, time and time again I come up against the dynamics that Nancy Gibbs so eloquently articulated: "small, scared people hate; self-hating people hate; bullied and betrayed people hate." These people not only need to look down on others to bolster their low self-esteem and fragile identity through delusions of racial or gender or religious

superiority; they need to persecute those whom they mistakenly believe to be the source of their fear. This will not work because *the real source of their fear lies within.*

I don't believe it is helpful to think about fighting hate—or fighting with people who hate. What we really need is something to heal the wounds that lead to hate. This brings us back to the message of Christmas and the gift, the medicine, the antidote of peace.

The apostle Paul tells us that inner peace is a “fruit of the Holy Spirit.” It is a state of being that comes when we feel Jesus' presence, the presence of the risen Christ within us. In the words of our opening hymn, the indwelling presence of Jesus sets us free. It sets us free from the “fears and sins” that imprison us. One of the “sins” that imprisons us is our fear; another is our hate. If, like the apostles, we can experience inner peace, we may be able to bring peace to the world. At the very least, we can bring peace to our little corner of the world.

The quantum physicists tell us that who we are and how we feel not only influence our perception of the world; they change the world. They impact the world around us more deeply than we know. If we are at peace within ourselves, if we center or ground our life in the presence of Christ, we can have a profound effect, a peaceful effect on other people and on life.

This truth is illustrated in the legend of the Rainmaker of Kiachau. Richard Wilhelm, the noted sinologist, witnessed an example of the kind of synchronicity that could be understood or explained from the perspective of quantum field theory when he was living in China and working on his translation of the *I Ching*.

There was a great drought in the section of China where Wilhelm lived. For months there had not been a drop of rain and the situation became catastrophic. The Catholics made processions, the Protestants offered prayers, and the Chinese burned fireworks to frighten away the demons of the drought. Nothing made the slightest bit of difference. Finally, the Chinese said, "We will fetch the Rainmaker."

From another province a little old man appeared. After a short period of talking with the people of the region where Wilhelm resided, the old man asked for the use of a little hut in the mountains where he secluded himself for three days. On the fourth day the clouds gathered, and then a torrential rain burst forth.

Wilhelm, who was stunned by what seemed to be much more than a coincidence, went to ask the Rainmaker how he did it. In true western fashion, he asked the man to tell him how he made it rain. The little Chinese man said: "I did not make the rain; I am not responsible."

Wilhelm asked him what he had done the past three days. The man replied, “I come from another section of the country, a place where things are in order. Here they are out of order; they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. Therefore, the whole country is not in Tao, is not centered, and I also am not in the natural order of things because I am in a disordered country. I had to meditate for three days until I reestablished my inner order, and then naturally the rain came.

Richard Wilhelm told the story of his experience to his friend and colleague C. G. Jung. Jung thought the story was important enough to direct his students to open every meeting of the Wednesday Analytical Psychology Club with its retelling.

The Legend of the Rainmaker suggests that if we are ordered within ourselves, we bring order to the world around us. If we are dis-ordered within ourselves, we bring dis-order to our relationships and our surroundings. Parents know this is true in relation to their impact on their children. If we are centered, we bring a centering presence to the world around us. If we are not centered, if we are scattered or anxious, we bring this energy into whatever situation we encounter. If we experience peace within ourselves, we bring peace to those around us. I think this is what the apostle Paul meant when we said, in 1 Corinthians 14:33, “God is a God not of disorder but of peace.”

The story of the Rainmaker is a teaching about connections. We could not influence nature if we were not deeply connected with nature. But, as we know, we are not only connected with nature; we are a part of nature. We are involved in an intimate relationship with nature. The quantum physicist H. P. Staff has said, “An elementary particle is not an independently existing, unanalyzable entity. It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.” In other words, even a little photon is, in essence, a set of relationships. This reminds us of the teaching of Nagarjuna, the second-century Buddhist philosopher, who said, “Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves.” We could not have an impact on those around us if we were not deeply connected with them. But we are interconnected with those around us! We are connected on a very deep and profound level! We are related; we are interrelated in and through God!

In the words of our opening hymn this morning, Charles Wesley speaks of that inner peace for which we long when he prays,

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.*

Wesley suggests that the Jesus for whom we long, the Christ-child whom we invite and welcome into our hearts, has the power to release us from the fears and sins that hold us in bondage. He tells us that we can find our rest, not only in the afterlife but also in this life, when we not only invite Jesus into our lives, but when we actually experience his presence.

Jesus experienced inner peace. He experienced a deep inner peace because he was grounded in his relationship with God. He experienced inner peace even when times were difficult, even when his life was difficult. When he was betrayed, denied, and deserted by his companions, he was still at peace within himself. This is because he found his peace through his connection with God, a connection that could not be broken, a presence from which he could not be separated.

When people encountered or were encountered by Jesus, they felt this great inner peace. By simply touching the hem of his robe, by listening to his words, by being in his presence, they experienced this peace in their own lives. They experienced what it means to be centered in Christ. This inner power, this inner presence led to healing. Demons that had plagued them were banished into the darkness. Their eyes and ears were opened. Their sicknesses were healed. They experienced a force of life that was even strong enough to call them back from the dead.

Immediately following his resurrection, Jesus bestowed a parting gift on his disciples. He gave them the gift of peace. This gift led to transformed lives; the disciples became apostles! Not only the disciples, but also the other people whose lives were transformed by Jesus experienced “the peace that passes all understanding.” We, too, can experience this inner peace! This is because we, like the disciples, have a relationship with Jesus. We find our center, our grounding in Jesus when, in the words of our hymn, he rules within our hearts.

In this church, we believe in the power of intercessory prayer. Every week for many of us, every day for some of us, we pray for those whom we know to be in great need. We don’t necessarily say anything. We may simply think about the person, hold him/her in our mind, and ask God to bring healing. We not only believe that our prayer makes a difference; we know it does. Because of our deep, fundamental interconnectedness, our prayer can activate a healing power within the person for whom we pray. It may assist a physical healing; it may bring courage to face what needs to be faced. If in some small way our prayer helps the person to live with a very difficult situation, our prayer will have accomplished a lot.

The people of Jesus’ day longed for peace. They longed to be delivered from that which bound them, that which kept them from being free. This is true of our day as well. We long to be delivered from the darkness that surrounds us, the thick darkness that covers the nations. We

long to be delivered from our anxieties, our fears, our addictions. We long to be delivered from our expectations, those expectations framed as hopes that keep us from accepting, affirming, and finding joy in our present life. We long to be delivered from our hatred and the hatred we experience in the world.

Last week we sang the hymn that Philip Brooks wrote in 1868: “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” This hymn addresses our “hopes and fears.” It holds forth the hope of “peace to men on earth.” It promises that if we can become meek enough to receive Jesus, to let him into our hearts, to let him be “born in us today,” we can experience inner peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

In this Advent season, let us return to Jesus. Let us open ourselves to his presence both within and among us. If we make room for him in our heart, if we give birth to him in our lives, he will bring us inner peace. Then we can bring peace to those around us and even, in ways far beyond what we can grasp, to a world that desperately needs it.

If the answer to darkness, fear, and hate is presence, this brings a healing dimension to the sacrament of presence which we are about to receive and share with each other. Let us now experience his presence both within and among us. Let us receive the gifts of hope and peace that he offers to us as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
December 3, 2021*