

ADVENT II -- THE ANSWER TO FEAR IS PEACE!

(12/10/12023)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
Galatians 5:22-26
John 20:19-22

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

Last Sunday was a special day! It was the first Sunday of Advent. The sanctuary of our little church, thanks to our decorator elves, looked absolutely amazing! The hymns and the anthem were great, and I thought my sermon went well. The communion service had that special feeling that it has (or that I experience) once in a while, the feeling that something special was happening. We had more delicious food for our coffee hour than we could eat in a week!

Following the worship service, four members of our church family who entered into full membership with our church this morning met with the Diaconate for a time of sharing. We each shared what our spiritual journey has been, what religious traditions were formative in our spiritual formation, what religious communities and special people sustained us or inspired us along the way, and how we ended up in this church. There were some very different stories, very different narratives!

It was a deeply moving experience for us all! Every time we do this, and we do it whenever people join our church, it reminds me that our church is like a beautiful fabric woven of many different threads, many different colors! The people in the room last Sunday were from Episcopalian, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Congregationalist (United Church of Christ), and Methodist traditions, and one was even a Christadelphian. (I am quite sure that is a first in the twenty-six years that I have been Pastor of this church!)

After I cleaned up the coffee that I had perked for the coffee hour (which I do, by the way, every Sunday), I left church tired, but happy! After a thirty-minute power nap, I settled down to watch the New England Patriots play the Los Angeles Chargers. The Patriots have been struggling this season. They went into the game 2-9, but with the Chargers only 4-7, this was a game we might be able to win. We had home field advantage. Mac Jones had been replaced by Bailey Zappe; the Chargers' pass defense was ranked last in the NFL; and I had just preached an inspiring sermon on the power of hope to challenge us, to raise us from the dregs of despair, to lead us into a new and better tomorrow!

When you get to be my age, you begin to realize that time is valuable. At the conclusion of one of the least exciting games I have ever watched, a game the Chargers won 6-0, I realized two and a half hours of my life were gone forever! I could never get them back! I might as well have spent my time watching a corn-hole tournament or a soccer game. By the way, I have a

suggestion that would make soccer more interesting. If we blindfolded the goalies, or if we duct-taped their arms and legs to a wheelchair, there would definitely be more goals! But that's not the point. The point is that watching a Patriots game this season spares those of us who have difficulty sleeping from having to rely on Ambien. It could also be that the deeply spiritual experience of hope, which I described so eloquently last week, often needs to be accompanied by more than a little patience!

Then came Thursday, when the Patriots scored more points in the first half than they have in the last four games, and our world here in New England turned upside down again! I guess there really is something to the power of hope—at least if you are either a Patriots or a Red Sox fan!

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 in Jesus. As the words of our opening hymn remind us, Jesus was “long-expected.” The world of Jesus’ day had been waiting for his birth. His people needed someone to lead them out of bondage to the Romans, just as Moses had led his people out of bondage to the Egyptians. Though they may not have realized it, they also needed someone to lead them out of their bondage to sin, out of bondage to themselves, and into the freedom that comes to those who place Jesus in the center of their life.

The candle of hope symbolizes one of the powerful themes of Christmas. As Christians, we have hope, even in dark times, because we are aware of God’s presence in the world. Desmond Tutu, who knows something about darkness, tells us, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” If we have hope, we do not succumb to the fears that drag us down and alienate us from each other. Hope is the conviction 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 grounded in wishing, but on an experience of presence.

Last week we talked about how hope enables us to defeat fear. It empowers us to envision a better future: the kingdom of God spread upon the earth. It helps us avoid hunkering down into literalism, fundamentalism, and religious tribalism in our response to the chaos that we experience around us.

This morning, Lou, Jen, and Olivia Dundin, who lit the second of our Advent candles, the candle of peace, told us that Advent is a time when we pray for peace: peace on earth, peace within our families, and peace within ourselves. They reminded us that Jesus came into the world to bring peace, and that he was called “The Prince of Peace.” During Advent, we long for that deep experience of peace that our fears have stolen from us, the peace that will serve as an antidote to the hate that is sweeping across the world, a hate that has the power to poison not only our communities but also our souls.

Immediately following his resurrection, when Jesus meets his disciples in the Upper Room, he says, “Peace be with you.” His presence calms their fears and calls them forth into apostleship. He says,

“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)

The Holy Spirit, Jesus’ presence within us, has the power to bring “the peace that passes all understanding,” a peace that leads us to engage the world in a loving, healing, reconciling way.

The peace that Jesus promised appears to be elusive. When we look at what is going on in the world, we see more fear than peace. Fear leads us into hurtful and destructive thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.

At the root of hate, e.g., the hatred of certain racial or ethnic groups, is fear. Nancy Gibbs, the former Editor-in-Chief of *Time* magazine, has said,

Hate, among all our base instincts, is the most distinctly human. In animals, violence and venom are tools of survival, in humans, 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.

Fear is an unpleasant, a vulnerable feeling. When we feel this, hate arises within us to make us feel strong, to make us appear strong—when what we really need to do is to face into, to embrace our vulnerability. In relation to the mass murder of Jews and Blacks, Ms. Gibbs says,

The twisted writings of this latest class of attackers suggest they felt called to their hatreds as a duty. Robert Bowers allegedly blamed Jews for their outreach to refugees and vowed to repel “invaders” moving north through Central America as he set off to the synagogue: “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered,” an account matching his name posted, like a martyr dispatched to a massacre. Accused mail bomber Cesar Sayoc stalked George Soros, the billionaire Holocaust survivor and Democratic donor, who conspiracy theorists claimed was funding that invasion—never mind that those armed invaders were nearly a thousand miles away and that the main thing in their arms was their children. “Whites don’t kill whites,” a witness quoted Gregory Bush as saying; he was arrested in the murders of two black shoppers at a Kentucky grocery store, allegedly having failed to get into a predominantly black church nearby.

Can you see the deep, ungrounded fear that distorts our thinking beyond reason, beyond logic, beyond reality, that lurks behind tribalistic hatred?

When I encounter the hate that drips from the pens of people in their social media posts, I try to remember what Ms. Gibbs said: “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, gender, or religious superiority; they feel they need to persecute those whom they mistakenly believe to be the source of their fear. However, this will not work. Why won’t it work? It won’t work because *the real source of their fear lies within!*

We need to heal the wounds that lead to fear, the fear that leads to hate. This brings us back to the message of Christmas and the medicine, the antidote, the gift of peace.

Paul tells us that inner peace is a “fruit of the Spirit.” It is grounded in an experience of the risen Christ within us. Our opening hymn assures us that the indwelling presence of Jesus sets us free. It sets us free from the “fears and sins” that imprison us. If, like the apostles, we can experience inner peace, we will bring peace to the world. At the very least, we will 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 actually affect or shape 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 on the outer world! Our peace radiates throughout infinity—or perhaps even eternity!

This is illustrated in the legend of the Rainmaker of Kiachau. The sinologist Richard Wilhelm witnessed a powerful example of synchronicity 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 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 a torrential rain burst forth.

Wilhelm, who was stunned by what seemed to be much more than a coincidence, went to talk with the Rainmaker. 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 this story 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. As Paul has told us, “God is a God not of disorder but of peace.” 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 are at peace within ourselves, we bring peace to those around us.

The story of the Rainmaker is a profound teaching about connections. We could not have an effect on nature if we were not deeply connected with nature. But we *are* connected with nature; we are a part of 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.” This is a fundamental principle of quantum field theory. Even a 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 effect on those around us if we were not deeply connected with them. But we *are* connected with them, connected on a very deep and profound level! We are connected with each other in and through God!

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.”*

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. Wesley 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 *enter more deeply into him!*

Jesus experienced inner peace because he was filled with an awareness of God's presence. 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 a connection that could not be broken, a presence from which he could not be separated.

When people came into contact with Jesus, they felt this great inner peace. By touching the hem of his robe, by listening to his words, by simply 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!

After his resurrection, Jesus bestowed a special gift on his disciples. He gave them the gift of peace, the peace that passes all understanding. This gift led to transformed lives. We, too, can experience this inner peace! This is because we, like the disciples, are connected with Jesus. We are connected with the living Jesus when, in the words of our hymn, he rules within our hearts!

This is why, 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 know that our prayer makes a difference. 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 a person in a difficult life situation to live and love, 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, which kept them from being free. We, too, long to be delivered from the darkness that surrounds us, the 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 the hatred that is poisoning our world.

Every Christmas season we sing 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." We can incarnate this peace if we can become meek enough to receive Jesus, to let him into our hearts. We will experience inner peace, the peace that passes all understanding, if we can allow our Lord to "be born in us today."

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.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD – A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

Christmas is a time of giving. We give presents to our loved ones. Perhaps we also stretch a little and give to those who are not near and dear to us, though perhaps they should be. In this church, through our December mission offerings, we give to the Salvation Army, an organization that gives so much to so many. When we do this, we share the Christmas message, the Christmas spirit with those who have so little.

It is in the spirit of Christmas that we dedicate our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many gifts we share with the world. Let us join in our unison Prayer of Dedication:

Almighty God, giver of every good and perfect gift, teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are, that we may praise you, not with our lips only, but with our whole lives, turning the duties, the sorrows, and the joys of all our days into a living sacrifice to you; through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.