

The Path to Peace

Rev. Edward C. Horne

United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

December 4, 2011
Advent II

Isaiah 9:1-7
Luke 1:67-79

When I checked into a hotel room recently, I noticed a new message hanging on my doorknob to keep the housekeeper away. Instead of the traditional, "Do Not Disturb," the sign now read, "Peace and Quiet." I understand that in some hotels they've got it down to just one word, "Peace."

Finding peace is getting increasingly challenging in what Len Sweet calls this TGIF culture. TGIF: that is, a Twitter, Google, iPhone, and Facebook. All those wonderful electronic connections that make it possible for us to stay in touch, stay on top, stay informed, stay current 24/7 also make it almost impossible to encounter "peace and quiet."

It only gets worse at this time of the year, of course. We get ready to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace by driving ourselves to distraction. It's funny how, whenever someone here at church tries to set a meeting date in December, they are met with groans and grimaces protesting, "Not this month—I can't do one more thing!"

All of which makes it a very good time to remind ourselves that peace does not drop down our chimneys on Christmas Eve. Peace, as Paul reminds in Galatians, is a gift, a fruit of the Spirit that we cannot produce on our own no matter how much we push or press for it. Like the other fruit in this series that we've been focusing on, peace must be cultivated and nurtured. And, like a plant growing up from the fruitful earth, it develops over time, little by little, until it is fully formed.

The search for peace is nothing new, of course. Some early Christians did crazy things like live in caves or even on top of pillars or pointed rocky outcroppings to get away from the busy world. Later others took up the monastic life and made vows of silence to still their souls.

But you don't have to climb a pole or seclude yourself in a monastery to find serenity. As a matter of fact, there is no guarantee that you will locate peace in any of those solitary places unless you can find it within. If you can, though, you will be at peace even in the most chaotic of circumstances.

In New Testament Greek, the word for peace is "eirene". This has a much deeper meaning than the absence of noise or conflict. It is closer to the Hebrew word,

“shalom,” meaning wholeness or completeness. Shalom is the peace where things feel right, like they’re fitting together and you are content. It’s a state where life is more than just ok, where worry and fear and anxiety are replaced by a quiet confidence that, no matter what happens, we will be all right.

That goes not just on the personal level but the societal one as well. For the prophets of the Old Testament, shalom was the peace that the promised Messiah would bring. It would be a time when all people would live in peace and have their fill. A time when the 99% would be in as good a shape as the 1%.

It’s the peace that Zechariah foresaw at the birth his son, John. This baby would grow up to baptize those who wished to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the one who would lead us all in the way of peace.

Admittedly, life is often far from peaceful. A few minutes of the evening news will give us plenty to fret over. Add to that our own concerns about our jobs, our health, the welfare of those we love, and we can get to be nervous wrecks.

But we don’t have to be. That is where faith can make such a difference. The path to peace travels through the territory of trust---placing our lives in the hands of God. And the peace that God offers is not a trouble-free life, but a trouble-transcending serenity of spirit to take on anything that comes our way.

Think about the difference it would make if you gave your troubles to God. Perhaps your children or grandchildren are facing a difficult situation. You turn to God and pray, “You know how much I love them, Lord. And you know how hard it is for me to let go and let them take this on alone. But I entrust them to your care. And I know that, no matter what happens to them, you will still have hold of them and won’t let them go.” That won’t prevent them from encountering problems, but it will give you the security of knowing that God will care for them when they do.

This is a different kind of peace from the one where you work yourself to the bone for fifty weeks and then go and collapse on a beach. It’s the peace you carry with you every day, the quiet inner assurance of those who know who they are and what they believe. It’s the peace that comes to the forgiving heart---carrying a grudge disrupts the spirit. It’s the peace that comes with a clear conscience—it’s hard to be at peace when you’re feeling guilty or conflicted about something. It’s the peace that comes with having a sense of purpose, of living for something beyond yourself. As Dante once said, “In his will is our peace.”

Some of us experienced that peace this past week, on a rainy and dreary Tuesday morning. I got a call from Dan Gelman that his father was near death and I went up to Marvin’s place at Meadow Ridge to be with Dan and the others who had gathered there. We spoke about Marvin, his interests and his work, his family and his friends. And

then we gathered to hold hands in prayer, including Marvin, who was not conscious.

Then something interesting happened. Just as we started, a car alarm went off outside in the parking lot. Then another one joined in to keep it company. And a phone rang. Yet none of that seemed to matter as we prayed with thanks for Marvin's good life, and we placed him in God's hands. A quiet fell over the room. There was a feeling of tranquility, even in the midst of the distractions and the heartache of what was taking place. There was peace. Deep, palpable peace.

Five minutes later, Marvin was gone. God had taken him back home. Marvin was in that place of perfect peace that awaits those who live in God's grace. A peace that will never end.

It was a memorable moment for all of us. Yet it is a moment that need not come only in death. Jesus promises peace in this life to all who place their lives in his care, who trust him and do his will. A peace of mind and quietness of soul that even this TGIF culture cannot drown out. A peace that the world cannot give to us nor take from us. A peace that can outlive all the anxiety and worry that threaten to overwhelm us. And a peace that flows on from heart to heart in an endless stream of love.