

Oh, that you would reveal your peace!
Advent 2: December 6, 2015
Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8
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Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Today is the second Sunday of gathering to profess that we expectantly wait for the coming of Jesus. We gather as together we cry out from our souls that God would reveal God's mystery to us. Today we pray "O, that you would reveal your peace!"

Well as Velma alluded to in her call to worship, this week's news continued to be flooded with stories of heartache, pain, terror, violence, destruction, and death. In addition to despair and hopelessness our world, our country, our homes, and our hearts are also flooded with fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of terrorists, fear of violence, fear of the other. In the midst of Advent, in the midst of waiting to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the World, what do we do with our fear? What and whom do we fear? Where does our fear take us? What does our fear prohibit us from doing? How are our fears projected? What does this season of Advent have to say about our fears? How does the coming of Jesus, the celebration of the Light of World, inform our fears? What are the avenues of ways Jesus shepherds us into peace?

Now before we get much further I need to make several admissions. First, and foremost, this sermon is as much for me as it is for you. I do fear really, really well. I can come up with possible worst case scenarios, really well. Trust me. Ask a member of the pastoral team, or my dear husband Luke. I can spin out a worst case scenario in 2.6 seconds. This sermon on fear and peace and the presence of Christ is for me. Please don't wrongly assume that I always have this fear thing figured out and under control and so somehow I'm projecting that I am mightier than thou. At the same time I also firmly believe, and actually from conversations know to be true, that this sermon is not simply *preaching to the choir*. We here at Waterford are not immune to

fear, and we are not immune to the messages of hate, terror, and violence that are constantly perpetuated around us. I believe that this message during this season of Advent, and during this season of such violence, destruction, fear is quite timely for I believe what you and I and the world desperately needs is in fact a word of peace. Fear is prevalent, pervasive, and persistent. It is my prayer that we can join with Isaiah in proclaiming instead the peace, the peace that passes all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, that peace is prevalent, pervasive, and persistent.

I would invite you turn with me to Isaiah chapter forty. Here we read the familiar words of the prophet Isaiah, words we usually hear each season of Advent and words that are connected later in the gospels with John the Baptist. In Isaiah 40 we find the people of God living in exile in a foreign land surrounded by worshipers of other gods.

The people of God hearing these words were in need of a word of peace and hope. They were in need of a powerful word that God in fact had not deserted them, and that God was still the one and only God, and furthermore that this mighty God would continue to be their shepherd.

In many ways the context of these faith followers is not altogether different from the world we find ourselves in today. Not only do we find them living in fear, we also find them living in a culture and environment where they are in the minority in terms of the theology and understandings of God. Their faith narrative and beliefs of the God whom they had entered a covenantal relationship with did not match the dominant narrative circulating around them by people they rubbed shoulders with every day.

Here in chapter forty Isaiah proclaims the message from God is that of comfort. It is of a God who instructs the people to speak tenderly to Jerusalem. The task is to comfort, to strengthen, and to encourage God's people. In the midst of proclaiming this profound word they

are also to engage in preparations for the coming of God and preparing the way for the return of the exiles. A word of comfort and peace is not enough. Instead the prophet instructs the people to put feet and hands and bodies behind that message of comfort and peace and get busy preparing the way. I would call these royal preparations needed to welcome the King of Kings and to pave the way back home into full fellowship with God.

This is the season of preparations. There are houses to decorate, gifts to buy and then wrap, food to purchase and prepare, guests to host, parties to attend, family get togethers to participate in, travel to accomplish, and the list goes on and on and on. However here we are talking about a different level and a different type of preparations. Beyond decorating, baking, buying and wrapping I wonder how we are busy preparing our homes, our land, our hearts to notice, acknowledge and welcome Christ the King? In the season that begs us to speed up and fill our lives and our calendars with more and more I have to believe that truly preparing for the coming of Jesus means to slow down, to remove more and more, and to join in proclaiming this profound and timely word of peace to the nations.

It is striking and important to note that this voice, this voice that we are to join, is one crying out in the wilderness. You might recall that the Israelites spent quite a bit of time in the wilderness. In fact throughout scripture we read of various accounts of people spending time in the wilderness. Life in the wilderness at times was unpredictable, hostile, and grounds for fear. Ah, but life in the wilderness was also times for faith formation and transformation. The wilderness was a place where God's people learned to put their trust in God and allow God to shepherd them through the unknowns, through the terrors of the night, shepherd them into peace. In the wilderness they had to learn to trust in God to provide, to protect, to be true to the covenantal relationship. In the wilderness it was just the faith community and God and they had

plenty of opportunity and time to solidify what they believed without the competing voices of Baal worshipers.

I think that today we do all that can do to prevent ourselves from going into the spiritual wilderness when in fact we have to go into the wilderness to help pave the road of peace, the road for the coming of Jesus. As we settle into the wilderness our dependence can return to God our maker and provider. As we settle into the wilderness we begin to get a clearer picture of the essentials of life. I hate to break it to you, but our technology gadgets and even all the holiday hoopla are not essentials. As we place our trust in God to shepherd us we also release the driving controls. Ah, as we place our trust in God we also acknowledge the reality that we do not see the whole picture and in fact God's ways are not always our ways, nor is God's time always our time.

In verse nine we are told to "proclaim good news, go up on a high mountain. Bring good news, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid." These are familiar and famous biblical words: do not be afraid. The angels will say them to Mary, Jesus will say them to his followers. We can look in books from Isaiah to Genesis to Psalms to Revelations and most books in between and we will find these words of do not be afraid or fear not. Now, perhaps unlike me you have mastered these words. I on the other hand work to not allow fear to overrun my life, my mind, and my emotions. What is the word to speak to our fears?

I think to begin with we need to acknowledge when we are feeling fear. I try to pay attention to what I'm thinking and feeling and put words to it. The other night is a prime example. Luke and I were woken up at 11:20 to Thomas screaming in severe abdominal pain. In exactly 2.6 seconds I had spun out the scenario that he was having an appendicitis, needed emergency surgery, had complications from surgery, and was in the ICU and struggling for life.

Remember I did confess that I do fear and worst case scenarios really well. At this point Elijah and Jeremiah are also awake and Elijah too is full of fear for Thomas. And as he joins in the anxiety and fears he emotionally asks, what can we do Mama? These simple words from my 6 ½ year old stopped me in my track and brought me to full recognition of how I was allowing fear to dictate and shepherd me. I looked at Elijah and I said, we can pray. So there huddled around our couch I prayed. And what did I say? I said God, we are afraid. I didn't deny it I didn't sugarcoat it I just sat in it and handed it over to God, the one who created this gift we call Thomas. And in the simple act of stopping to pray we were reoriented to the one I want and desperately need to shepherd us, the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah understood that it was not enough to just give this proclamation to be bearers of this good news of comfort and hope and the instructions to not be afraid. For if it had been enough the chapter could have ended with verse 11. Instead Isaiah continues for the next twenty verses to remind them and us how awesome and mighty and amazing this God is. In case we had forgotten this amazing God not only created the world, this God is also the one who holds the stars in place and holds us. Furthermore this God is greater than any nation, any government, any image or idol we could create. **And moreover this God, awesome God, does not expect us to proclaim or embrace or live into peace on our strength.** In verse twenty we are told that God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on the wings like eagles; they will run and not go weary, they will walk and not faint. (deep breath) **I nor you have to do this on our own strength or own power. God, the Prince of Peace, is present to shepherd us into peace. Hallelujah and thanks be to God.**

Please be sure to hear me. There are great tragedies and evilness throughout the world. I do not have answers for how we should respond to such act of terrors or hatred or violence. The response of stopping in the midst of our fear to pray seems meager at best and hopeless at worst. However, I do believe that it has the power to reorient us to the truth that God is still God and that as God's people we are commanded to be people of peace. I think that this then also translates to what our next step is with our fear. The world's message is more guns. And prior to this week I wanted to insist that this message was not into my congregation and surely not in my own house! However, I had to face reality on Monday night. Elijah, who is 6 1/2, and is aware I am going to share this story. Well Elijah had strep throat the week of Thanksgiving and on Monday he brought home papers from the previous week including a scholastic flyer on Thanksgiving. So Monday night he and I were looking at this flyer together. On the inside there were a variety of pictures of the pilgrims and their journey to the next land. Of course they are presented in glowing fashions that minimizes the destruction and upheaval they brought that continues to have lasting impact across our nations.

Back to the pictures they talked about the pilgrims' journey to the new land from the large boat to what they ate on the trip and then the last picture had the pilgrims on a small boat to get to land. And as we looked at the pictures Elijah said "Look Mama, the pilgrims brought their guns." I lean in to look closer and sure enough there are large guns, rifles or something like it. I give a noncommittal "hmmm" hoping that maybe we could just move on, but oh no, Elijah then says "Mama, why did they bring their guns with them?" I give another noncommittal "hmmm" and then Elijah answers his own question. He said "They must have been afraid of what they would find in the new land so they brought their guns with them." My sweet, innocent 6 1/2 year old. My beloved child that is only allowed to watch shows on PBS and even then not all of them

for some I consider too violent. The one who is not allowed to play violent make believe or have violent toys or draw violent pictures. The one we have worked to nurture, protect, shepherd into the way of peace and pacifism. And yet, the message of the world has reached him.

My response? To begin to cry. And I said to Elijah “Elijah I wish that the pilgrims did not feel like they had to bring their guns if they were feeling scared.” “But Mama, what could they have done?” “Well, I wish that they would have come and tried to get to know their new neighbors without guns, without violence, able to reduce any fears that they had. I wish that they could have used their words.” And Elijah looked at me, not fully understanding the depth of my emotion and said “me too Mama, me too.”

The amount of guns in our world is heart shattering and destructive. And the message that is being circulated is that guns are what we need to combat our fears. Feel afraid, you need a gun. You have a right to defend yourself. Shoot first and then ask questions. I was so saddened by the number of guns I saw as I leafed through the inserts for black Friday sales. And these were not hunting guns but hand guns and guns marketed to be able to hide in your pocket or your purse. Or if not guns then walls, perhaps walls like were pictured on the US Mexico border. Are you afraid? Build walls. Build then higher and stronger and higher yet. All these do is give us a false sense of security.

Our only security rests in Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the light we await this season of Advent. As Christians we are also not to fear death, for we believe that death is not the end. I also believe that when Jesus said we are to love our enemies he actually meant that. As I was coming home from Ohio last weekend I saw a bumper sticker that said “When Jesus said to love our enemies, I think that means we probably shouldn’t kill them.” We are to be people of peace and that peace must begin deep within each and every one of us.

However, it is not enough for each of us to resolve within ourselves that we will embrace God's peace, and live into Jesus' command to love our enemies. Instead we must allow God to shepherd us into peace and propel us on the road to proclaim it, usher it in, break down the walls to welcome it, and invite others to share the peace only available through Jesus. Part of the weariness of the journey is when we feel like we are alone, so let's commit to unite on this front and live and proclaim and welcome and make a way for the peace of Christ to reign. One voice is not very loud against many others projecting a different message. But if we all join our voices, our actions, to live and preach and usher in peace our voice gets louder, our unity in the Spirit grows, our ability increases to drown out the alternative narratives flooding around us. I need that. My children need that. I believe that you need that. And the world, the world that God created and loves, needs that.

One definition of peace, of shalom, is "nothing broken, nothing missing." This season of advent we wait, we expectantly wait for the full realization of God's shalom on earth – nothing broken, nothing missing. May we join with Isaiah and John the Baptist in proclaiming this message of Good News of Peace to all. And as we do so may we yield ourselves to the Great Shepherd and welcome and allow ourselves to be shepherded into peace. May it be so.