

Peace

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

What does peace look like? When you imagine peace what does it look like or what does it feel like? Today's reading from Isaiah gives us a lyrical if unlikely image of peace,

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

In Isaiah's vision no creature will sacrifice their lives so that another may live. All beings will be vegetarian and prey animals will live in harmony with their predators. There will be peace with humans – a child will be able to lead not just cows and goats but also lions and leopards. This beautiful image of the peaceable kin-dom is Isaiah's picture of peace.

Take a moment if you will to think about your picture of peace and share it with someone sitting near you.

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Many of us imagine peace as an absence of conflict or war, or the quiet of a place of beauty. But in the Hebrew scriptures the word for peace, Shalom, means much more. It means a time when there will be justice for all, a time when each one will have all they need to flourish without threatening anyone else. The prophet Micah describes it like this:

Then God will judge between many peoples and arbitrate for strong nations far and wide.
Then they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer take up the sword against nation, nor will they train anymore for war. And each one will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, with no one to frighten him. (Mic. 4:3,4)

Shalom does describe an end to war but it also describes the reign of God when each one will have all that they need, and we might add, 'and nothing extra.'

The image of the peaceable kingdom and ideas of Shalom both include reconciliation. Reconciliation between those who were previously enemies. Reconciliation between those who previously preyed on each other. Reconciliation between humanity and Creation. Reconciliation between God and all of Creation which includes humanity.

Someday when you get to church early and are wondering what to do with yourself, I recommend that you read through the Catechism which starts on page 845 of the red Prayer Book. There you will find, on page 855 the important question, “What is the mission of the Church?” In other words, why are we here? and the answer given is “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” Just a small item that we can probably take care of before lunch, right?

We are here on this earth at this time “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” We are here, my friends, to create shalom. When all people are restored to unity with God and each other in Christ they will also be restored to unity with the whole of Creation. The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8 that creation is groaning as if in childbirth waiting for the children of God to get their act together. (Rom 8:22)

Peace is not going to descend from heaven ready made until the end of time, and since we are co-creators with God, we are a big part of creating that peace. In fact it’s our mission, it’s what the church is for.

There are two aspects of peace I’d like us to consider this morning. Inner, and Outer.

Outer peace will not come unless there is justice. By justice, I mean a social order where everyone has what they need and none of us are overusing the world’s resources or trying to get more for themselves, their family or their tribe. We are a long way away from that. It seems that we are in a time of increasing conflict which is spurred in part by dwindling resources especially of fossil fuels and water, and in part by our own attitudes toward each other which are underpinned by fear. In this country the current administration refuses to fully engage in international cooperation, apparently believing that might is right.

For example, the World Trade Organization mediates trade disputes through a court system. By blocking the appointment of new appellate judges, the United States has made it impossible for disputes to be resolved, claiming that the court is unfair to the US. In the verses I read from Micah we heard, “Then God will judge between many peoples and arbitrate for strong nations far and wide.” An important mechanism that humans have developed to judge between many peoples and arbitrate for strong nations far and wide, has been rendered virtually useless. This takes us away from peace, not toward it.

Outer peace does not come easily. Because true peace requires honesty and integrity. In the gospel reading we heard John the Baptizer railing against the Pharisees and Sadducees. He was not making nice; he was not promoting a false peace where the powerful get to have things their way and the poor and marginalized are exploited by ideology and economics. Peace depends upon social justice, which means that the rich get to reduce their consumption so that there is more for the rest of the world, and then structures have to change so that resources are differently distributed.

A great migration has started from those countries where there is violence and war to those countries where there is relative peace and prosperity. This migration will only continue as parts of the world become uninhabitable because of extreme heat, or disappear under the ocean. Outer peace is likely to be increasingly difficult in the coming century.

Inner peace is different. Inner peace is possible even in the most difficult of circumstances. Inner peace is based on the conviction that God's love is underpinning all. Cultivating inner peace is not going to change the structures of society, for that we need political action. But inner peace is going to give us the basis on which we can work for reconciliation and unity without the fear and anxiety which provoke conflict. On a very simple level, if someone is annoying you, you have two possible responses – one is to get them to change, the other is to change yourself. In most situations when we are peaceful and serene we can let go of our desire that they change and instead take care of our own needs. When you are cultivating inner peace you are no longer a slave to the external factors of your life.

I heard a story on the Hidden Brain on NPR this week about how elite soldiers are trained. Apparently scientists have looked at the difference between how we behave when we are in a relaxed, rational place and how we behave when we are freaked out. They called the calm state “cool” and the freaked out state “hot”. It seems that most of us are surprised by how we behave, what we do and say when we are “hot”. Elite soldiers are trained to think and behave in a cool way even in circumstances that would make most of us hot. For example, if I lose even a few hours sleep I go to hot much quicker than when I am well rested. These young people may be deprived of sleep for days on end and taught how to make decisions under sleep deprivation and the stress of combat. They learn how to stay cool even when the situation is hot.

This is important for us who are called to be the church, whose mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. We're less likely to do that well when we're cranky and hot. Cool compassionate thinking happens when we are grounded and rooted in the love and peace of God. But we are not going to have that cool compassionate thinking when life is making us hot unless like the elite military we have been practicing and practicing in advance.

So let's take just a moment together to practice a breath prayer that came up in yesterday's meditation workshop. Get comfortable, relax, maybe close your eyes and as you breathe in say “God is here,” as you breathe out say “All is well”. God is here, all is well...

God give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.