

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.
LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.

Selah

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

SERMON: "Peace" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Anthony Brown is an award-winning British author of children's books. One of his more recent and notable efforts that has garnered him additional acclaim has been his work, "Voices in the Park." It presents an encounter unfolding between parents, children and pets, each of whom come to that park in a certain mood, some of them happy, some of them anxious, some of them sad, some of them just glad to be outdoors. The encounter is short. It is mundane and normal. Small little things in the midst of absolutely regular and ordinary lives. Yet it is an encounter that profoundly vexes one of them, lifts another, inspires a third, and offers a moment of hope for the fourth. This story, "Voices in the Park," is actually a re-visit to one of Brown's earlier works called simply "A Walk in the Park." He took that old story, simply narrating this same encounter, and he expanded it to recount that same event from the perspective of each of the parents and each of the children in their park that day, from a mom and her son who bring their pet Victoria, and from a dad and his daughter who bring their pet Albert, too. He does it to see how the very same moment is experienced and understood so profoundly differently, to see how the interpretations of certain actions and reactions become turning points in how that particular character made meaning of what was happening, each voice authentic and true to themselves. But it takes all of them to really see what happened on that thoroughly normal day in the park, all of them to bring themselves fully into that story.

It is a technique called multi-perspectivity. Try that at home! It is one that is gaining in popularity in modern storytelling, telling a story from all the lenses of the people that are in it. Not that we have one homogeneous view, but get to see the myriad of reactions within that story. It is making its way in popular fiction to great acclaim. But it also is a technique that historical scholars are turning to time and time again, to look at old events and big events and small events that have been told through a single lens, and instead trying to encounter the fullness of the lens, because we know that with more of a full story, we know more fully what happened, but also so that we can enter more fully into the story along with those people.

That idea of multi-perspectivity is at the heart of the Psalms. The Psalms, you see, over time have recorded events, moments and yearnings, sometimes from individual perspectives like David, and sometimes communal ones like the people. And then we have taken those things and looked back at them by telling them over and over again, bringing our own perspective to the story, and listening desperately for those who have come before in their own moments. Each time a voice is heard or raised includes new layers of meaning, and each time it offers us a new way to get into that story.

Our reading for this morning highlights that very truth. And I want to thank Ted for the way he brought that story to life – outside in the beauty of the land surrounding his home. Truth be told, Ted didn't even fully know what he was doing at that particular moment. Did you hear him? He emphasized a word that might have sounded strange to your ears: *Selah*. It was strange to Ted's too. But like Mary and Joseph before, Ted didn't shy back. Ted, instead, just jumped in and hit that word with a bit of a hammer. And I am deeply grateful.

Truth be told, we're not entirely sure what that word means. But scholarship thinks they know, and that is this: that whenever in the Psalms you see the word *Selah*, it means that you are supposed to pause, you are supposed to meditate, you are supposed to contemplate that which has just come before. A perspective of meaning has been offered that we might want to think about before we move on to the rest of the story.

And there is a beautiful truth that evolves in this passage, that we are not defined by the worst of our moments. We are forgiven for all the things we have done. And yet there is also within this reading from Psalms a challenging call, that unless we honor, own and address our shortcomings, we also can never fully heal the failures of our lives or the failures of our connections. This psalm reminds us that we must bring those seemingly contradictory things first into conversation and connection before we can move forward. When we both honor the forgiveness that is already ours and the reason we need that forgiveness, we can be open to moving forward into those ways that we are hurt or hurting, in honest and open ways that life and new life might happen. As I've studied the Bible about this concept of sin, there's one thing that the Bible makes perfectly clear, that sin leads to tangible outcomes. And perhaps the one most concerning is that sin leads to barriers, to interruption in relationship, and to separation.

And so before we go on to the rest of the psalm, I want to honor what Ted has so powerfully invited us to do. Before we jump into peace and its embrace of righteousness, to pause in meditation, both on that forgiveness that is offered as well as that for which each of us needs forgiveness in the first place.

(pause for meditation)

Friends, know this: Whatever you were thinking about, the ways maybe you have fallen short, know that you are already forgiven. That is a truth of our gospel. And remember that in this church, whenever we engage in formal confession, we almost always follow it up with the Passing of the Peace, a sign of reconciliation and connection.

Peace, this word for today, is a word we throw around a lot in church. We share it, we offer it, we pray desperately for it. And perhaps in the act of doing it, we come at that notion of peace from a multitude of perspectives, bringing who we are in that moment to our encounter with it, not unlike what unfolded in the park.

Did you know that peace shows up some 100 times in the New Testament? It shows up in every book but one. And if you know the name of the book that it doesn't show up in, send it to me, and I'll send you a prize. It is such a dominant part of the New Testament. It is the gift that Jesus told his disciples he was leaving with them right before he left, and even the title by which we come to know him. In the New Testament, its meaning for the word *irene* primarily means a bridging and relational act. It connotes wholeness and well-being. It acknowledges sin, shortcoming and separation, but as a way of leaning into re-connection with God and neighbor. To be at peace is to be in connection with one another. That is a truth you know in your heart. *Irene* is that embodied sense of rightness in relationship that we all know comes through honest and hard work – peace of mind, peace of body, peace of connection, peace that benefits and blesses both of the parties. And simultaneously, it is something we know we need to practice, for it's radical, countercultural and amazing.

That word *irene* was a common word in the time of Jesus, common in the Greco-Roman world at the time. And *irene* from the Greco-Roman perspective also meant prosperity and abundance. But it really connoted the lack of war and the abundance that followed the vanquishment of a foe. Peace and wealth that came as a result of conquest, killing, oppressing, and subjugating your enemy – Pax Romana. That was a definition of peace the Empire provided. Peace as a benefit for one at the cost of the other. In Rome, lavish celebrations were thrown for peace at the cost of the enemy. Intentionally gluttonous affairs where people celebrating bounty by eating way too much, by drinking way too much, and staying up way too late. It was all supposed to be about the fullness of life, but ironically an act of delusion that leads to, well, you know, a hangover the next day. And no good road ahead, for if you're celebrating peace that comes when you beat a foe, you are always wondering when the next battle is about to unfold. And will you be celebrating, or be celebrated over?

But Jesus, instead, says no, there is indeed a feast. In fact, it's right here on the communion table. He says Come to it, all of you. Come often to remember the way. And you know what? Invite your enemies, too. Love your enemy as I have loved you. Bring reconciliation and wholeness. Gather around this table, yes, to remember a victory, but not at the cost of anyone. Instead, a victory of life and love itself. Bring people together that we might remember the blessings of life and church, so that we don't wake up depleted tomorrow, but inspired. So that we don't wake up

waiting for some day to come yet in the future, but living for this very day. Wake up reveling in that feeling of rightness with ourselves, with God, and with each other.

Friends, that is the kind of peace, the kind of togetherness and reconciliation that are front and center in this beautiful passage. There is such gorgeous poetry. Notice that there are always two things being bridged together. Steadfast love and faithfulness meeting each other. Do you remember when you met the love of your life? Do you remember that moment, that first glance, that stirring of emotion, that moment that suggests there will be moments of lingering to come? It is that moment that we're pointing to, where love and faithfulness come together, not as an ending, but rather as a new beginning. That beautiful thing of righteousness and peace kissing each other, a culmination and expression of togetherness. I think that is why the apostle Paul wrote to the church so often something that seems scandalous to us now, but when you pass the peace, do it with a kiss. A kiss of love and connection. A kiss that bridges us to righteousness which, by the way, is not perfection, but rather just simply living into our covenant with each other.

Here in the 85th Psalm, we get the contrast of God's peace with Empire's peace, no matter what empire it is and no matter in what age it is. Both of them do focus on abundance, abundance to be lived in and celebrated. But here in the 85th Psalm, you will notice right following these words of these things coming together is the promise that God will give goodness, that bounty will be found through this victory of coming together as one people. Not through contest or conflict, but through lives dedicated to living into peace.

I hope you watched our slide show this morning of all those passages dealing with peace. Because what you will notice is that time and time again, the command in those passages is to actively pursue and to practice peace. That the mark of our lives as Christian people is nothing short of pursuing peace doggedly, and living into its reality.

Blessed are the peacemakers, after all. That is righteousness, the path laid out. That is where we're called to go this Advent, right there to peace. Speaking of Advent, Luke's Gospel uses *irene*, that word for peace, to focus our attention like a laser on the Child we're waiting for. And I hope these examples are helpful:

Did you know that Zechariah's last word is that his son, John the Baptist, is preparing for the One who will guide our feet into the way of peace. It is in Luke's Gospel that the lips of Gabriel proclaim peace as the purpose of the coming of the Christ Child. And finally, as ancient Simeon gets a glimpse of baby Jesus in the Temple, he proclaims that God can now dismiss his servant in that peace. Peace as a thing, a process and a destination, as a major focal point of our lives.

That is what Luke wants us to hear in these times, that we too might take a *Selah* – remember that means meditative pause – that we might slow down in Advent long enough that we might approach the encounter that is coming at Christmas, open to our own space and place, whether cranky, joyful or a mix of both, and open to the space of others. That together, we might take all of those perspectives, share them and weave them into tapestry that connects and captures a fuller truth on just who Jesus is, and why we wait for him year after year.

Sadly, the characters in that great book, “Voices in the Park,” each went their separate way, each to reflect on what they noticed, but never sharing with one another their encounter and their experience, never teaching the other what was really going on, that they might see the fuller truth in the story.

Friends, in Advent, let us not be those characters. Instead, this Advent, let us embrace multi-perspectivity in how we encounter these moments, in how we encounter God, in how we encounter Scripture, and each other, too, that we might find the fuller story of Advent and the good news of Jesus Christ. That we might seek peace and pursue it. That we might be a beacon, the very light of Christ, to reveal His path, His purpose, His story, and our salvation, too.

Friends, this Advent, peace be with you. Amen.