

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent

“Peace”

Part II of the Advent Sermon Series, “What Can’t Wait?”

Jeremiah 6:13-15, Luke 2:8-14

George C. Anderson

Jeremiah 6:13-15

¹³ For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
¹⁴ They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, “Peace, peace,”
when there is no peace.
¹⁵ They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the LORD.

Luke 2:8-14

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of



David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The den is a disaster zone, and the 3-year-old boy is asleep on the couch. Chaos a half hour ago, but right now a moment of peace. His parents stand over their son. “[He’s an angel](#),” whispers the father. “[Only when he’s asleep](#),” the mother whispers back.

A single mom, home from work and now doing chores, suddenly realizes that she is by herself in the laundry room and no child is yelling her name. The unfolded laundry looks both clean and soft. She lays her head down on the pile and closes her eyes. A rare moment of peace and quiet.

A fence topped by barbed wire now marks the border. Right now, there exists a truce between the warring regions. A shaky peace. But will it last? A squad patrols the fence because you can never be too sure.

A moment of calm. Of quiet. Of rest. These are the kind of images we often think of when we think of peace: a still moment when nothing is happening. Google the word “peace” and check out the images graphic designers choose to illustrate it.

- A sky without clouds,
or a rainbow after a storm.
- A still, untroubled body of water.
- A field of flowers lazily standing in the sun because right now there is no wind to buffet them.
- A solitary figure standing or sitting alone, enjoying the quiet and the view.
- A cemetery where peace means life has come to an end.

It is for this kind of peace we long for when we say, “[I want some peace and quiet](#).” What we really mean is, “[I want to be left alone](#).”

Those images mean a lot to me. Those are the kind of moments I need from time to time to rest, take a break, disengage, or even to have a Sabbath moment. But that is not the peace of which the prophet Jeremiah speaks in our passage. At this moment in Jeremiah’s life and career, Judah is “at peace;” which is only to say, Judah is not at war. The Babylonians are a threat, but Judah is paying tributes—extortion payments really—to keep that empire from invading. The economic crisis caused by the tributes and the threat of war requires harsher measures to keep peace at home.

It is not good, and you would think that this would be a situation that Judah’s leaders would want to change. But despite the fact that the vast majority of people are suffering, the rich seem to be doing OK. Judah has been put on a tilt where privileges, protections, goods and services flow



toward the few at the great expense of the many. In fact, Judah's king, Mattaniah, is even building himself a new palace because the one he inherited from Josiah isn't grand enough. So, those who hold the reigns of power and control the flow of goods are not anxious for change. And fortunately for them, there are religious leaders who are more than happy to tell them that God doesn't want things to change either. God thinks things are just fine. "We are at peace, so let's keep the peace," they say. "The whole country can rest and be still. It's all right."

Jeremiah doesn't buy it. He is that guy who isn't fooled by appearances. He has the insight people like J.P. Snow and Jack London will later have that sometimes what some call civilization is really the thin veneer of barbarism. Though the king's chosen religious advisors keep saying to him, "Peace, peace," Jeremiah knows that there is no peace when justice and compassion are wanting. "They don't even blush," Jeremiah says of these Yes Men. That's his way of saying, "They ought to be ashamed of themselves for blessing injustice as justice and being casual about the suffering of the poor just because the privileged are doing OK."

Jeremiah doesn't want peace and quiet. He doesn't want something still and calm. He doesn't want to leave the king or the nation alone. Those graphic images of peace I spoke of earlier—those serene scenes of calm and tranquility—are not for him. Peace for Jeremiah is going to have to be busy, disruptive, lively, active, noisy.

It is going to be that way because the peace the prophet looks for, that peace that the Bible calls "Shalom," is something alive and working. Shalom is what God's love looks like, and that means it looks like a community actively and sacrificially working for justice and showing compassion. It is people actively putting other's interests ahead of their own because the wellbeing of everyone is everyone's concern.

So, as much as we all want and need those moments of rest and calm where we are left alone and can catch a breath, let's get those images out of mind when we think of the peace of which Jeremiah speaks. Think of communities that constantly need work, maintenance and renovation for there to be peace within and among them.

Here's the thing though, and this goes to the heart of what Jeremiah says. Images of communities at peace can be accurate, or they can be veneers. Here is an example of what I mean.

Picture a large gathering at a holiday meal.

This could be a large, reunited family where siblings and cousins are glad to be reunited with each other, feeling relaxed with those who know and love them as they are. It is loud because conversations are happening at the same time. At one table there is a spirited debate as some express opinions they have to keep to themselves back home among neighbors and co-workers. At another table, folks are laughing harder than ever at stories they have told many times before. At some point a nephew will ask an aunt for advice about college, and a cousin will help another cousin think through issues about a relationship and a job. Special attention is given to the great grandparent who needs a walker, and there is some logistical conversation between him and his two children about what arrangements might need to be made for his care in the coming year. Busy, active, sharing... a family working at being a family where everyone has a place and everyone is cared for. And time flies.



Or, that same image of a large gathering at a holiday meal could be of a family hiding longstanding divisions and current strains, actively working to keep resentments from surfacing. There is no debate because disagreements too quickly escalate into shouting matches. There is the uncle who seems to enjoy sharing his offensive views about anyone—really everyone—who doesn't look, think and love like him. He seems to enjoy how he can get under others' skins and the efforts they keep making to change the subject or not hear what it is he is saying. There is the daughter who was made to come and barely tries to hide her misery in being there. There is the cousin and her husband acting as if they are happy but really wondering if they will still be a couple this time next year. Resentments, anger, and sometimes disdain contained, which make lasting through this holiday gathering something of an ordeal. And time grinds.

I know, I know; I have just been extreme in my characterizations. The truth is that most all extended families are combinations of what I have described. I am only trying to make the simple point that neither conflict nor peace are static and still.

Neither justice nor injustice,
neither kindness nor cruelty,
neither dysfunction nor recovery
neither hatred nor love,
are static and still.

They are busy, active, noisy, even hard because they all involve the *active work of living*.

If we are on the same page about this, let's now consider a story that is often depicted as something still, quiet, and calm.

In that same region, shepherds are out in a field keeping watch over their flock by night.
Do you see the stars twinkle?
Can you feel the gentle breeze?
Do you see fluffy sheep that you want to cuddle,
or maybe count when you want to go to sleep?

But in this story, there are angels. In the Bible, whenever there is an angel or a messenger from God, it is never to say, "Be calm. Be still. Things are not going to change. Take a break, you deserve it." They say things like

- "Get out and don't return" to Adam and Eve in the garden.
- "Your baby won't die but will be the father of a nation. So, go back and take care of him," to Hagar.
- "Go into the land promised to you," to the Israelites.
- "You're going to have a baby" to Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary."

Do I need to explain why those are not announcements of calm?



In our story, the multitude of angels say, “Glory to God above and peace for the world below.”

“Peace,” here does not mean being still and quiet.

To fully appreciate what I mean, we need to consider the context. Let’s remember how chapter 2 of Luke begins: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.”

All the world? Well, yes, mostly. All the *known* world anyway. These are the days of the Roman Empire, the days of *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. They shed much blood and caused enormous carnage to bring powers to their knees. Now there is this massive, imposed peace, enforced by Roman legions, and financed by taxes which will be maximized after a census is taken to determine everyone who *can* be taxed. Migrations are happening all over the region as people travel to their hometowns in order to be counted. The peace of Rome is a veneer.

And these shepherds? They are not resting. They are among the poorest of the poor and so they can’t for a minute quit watching for predators of their sheep. And an angel appears to them and tells them that a king is born in Bethlehem where David was born—the Messiah—a Savior. His kingdom will be the promised kingdom of Shalom where justice is every day’s project and every person’s work... where compassion does not wait to be requested by the desperate on the streets but is actively shown toward those in need.

At the end, a multitude of angels announce “peace on earth” to these shepherds. The shepherds are not to rest and be still. They are to move. They are to go to Bethlehem to see this child who will be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger because there is no room in the inn due to the migrations. So, they *go with haste* to find this child and to make known all that they have seen and heard.

And this child, this Prince of Peace, will grow to be someone who never stops. He’ll preach, he’ll teach, he’ll heal the sick, he’ll comfort some and upset others, he’ll challenge the status quo and disturb the peace that is no peace. The day will come when the polishers of the veneer will try to get him to be calm, be still, and at rest by killing him. But it turns out that God’s Shalom can’t be killed.

What can Shalom mean for our lives today?

My sermon has been full of images, and I want to close with just a few more.

Imagine a marriage needing healing. Imagine an angel appearing over the marriage and announcing peace. This announcement can’t simply mean, “**be calm and wait**,” because that would be polishing the veneer over the marriage as it is. Really the angel’s announcement raises questions.

What now?

What does that now mean for the marriage?

What hard work of reconciliation needs to be done?

What needs to be said or heard?

What needs to be looked at and what needs to change?



Imagine a family dealing with addiction. Imagine an angel over the family proclaiming peace.

What tough love is being summoned?

Who needs to admit a problem and ask for help?

What is happening within the system of this family that needs to change?

What enabling needs to end and what steps need to be taken?

Imagine a community where homelessness is a problem, where some streets are not safe, where there are too many hard divisions of race and class. Imagine an angel appearing and proclaiming peace.

What is being called for from people of faith and people of power?

What systems need to change?

What programs need to be supported or even invented?

Who needs to get to know who and who needs to join forces?

Imagine a country polarized, with each half of the country demonizing the other? Imagine an angel appearing over that nation proclaiming peace.

What truth needs to be told and what lies need to stop?

What self-righteousness needs to end?

What conversations need to take place?

What compromises need to be made?

What voices need to be heard, as hard as some of those voices are to listen to?

What work of reconciliation needs to be done

to overcome the work being done to divide?

Imagine your own life, where you are in your family, your community, your nation and your world. Think of the sky above you littered with angels who won't stay still and won't stop singing. You can't ignore them until you find some answers to some questions.

What work do you need to do?

What sacrifices do you need to make?

What needs to change...

for more of the Shalom of God's kingdom to be more real in your life?

