

Sermon 11-27-22

Paul Purdue preaching

The shift manager and a few fast-food workers strung lights and corporate themed ribbons on the Christmas tree. Once at my table, I noticed the cheerful soundtrack chirping “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.” Was it? Part of me always wants to push back on Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving and definitely before Halloween, but no one appointed me to the celebration police and I am pretty sure our world does not need another negative comment. It is good that we are singing, decorating and longing for moments of faith, hope and love.

Our Psalm was first sung as a pilgrimage song, as the festival goers walked up the mountain road to Jerusalem. They came for one of the three week-long religious festivals: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. They came from Egypt, Babaloyan and Galilee rejoicing to be back home in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was beautiful, one of the wonders of the ancient world, a capital city bedazzled with David’s Palace and Solomen’s Temple. The pilgrims sing about peace and unity, but Jerusalem is a city that has rarely know peace. Indeed, before the Temple could be built a civil war divided the royal family and nation, with King David’s beautiful son Absalom seeking justice for his sister Tamar leading a rebellion that drove David from the palace in shame. The city and Temple was destroyed by the Babaloyans in 587 BCE and then again by the Romans in 70 AD. Jesus will weep over Jerusalem lamenting: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem you who murder the prophets! If only you knew during these holy festival days, of all the days, the things that lead to peace, but your eyes are closed to God’s gracious presence with you.* (Matthew 23 & Luke 19) Jesus weeps for all people unable to find or live very long in peace. Hear how Jesus longs to gather up both allies and enemies clutching them to his breast like a mother hen spreads out her wings to shelter and warm her chicks as predators lurk and winter winds blow. (Matthew 23 & Luke 13) Blessed are those who make for peace, they are the children of God. (Matthew 5) Will you dare hum, dream, or learn a song of peace? Will we make straight our pathways for the Coming Christ, adorning our nests and preparing our hearts so that a deeper peace might roost in our lives?

Lacking smartphones, photography or video reels the pilgrims marveled when seeing the Temple’s beauty. (Mark 13) The Temple grounds were massive and beautiful with stone pillars, beautiful gardens, tapestries, fountains, and tables selling festival gear. The worship was glorious: trumpets, tambourines, communal singing, dancing, professional musicians and singers, smoky incense, and real fires on the altar. There were comforting rituals, homecomings and big holiday meals. They came in singing, praying, hoping: “Pray for the peace of the City-state: Peace be within your walls. For the sake of those I love I plead, “Peace be within you.” The pilgrims entered singing, longing and hoping for more than the sum of their songs, decorations and gifts.. They longed for abiding peace with God, themselves and neighbors.

“God’s peace be with you” was the everyday Jewish greeting. The difficulty of well-traveled Bible words like peace, love, or salvation is that these words are general

expressions of everyday conversation but hold much deeper theological and religious significance. We say “I love cheeseburgers” , “I love my sister,” and “love your neighbor” with the same words. (Gerhard von Rad in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Volume 3 “εἰρήνη”) Like sugary cherry kool-aid given to a hungry child, a shallow sense of God’s peace leaves our world still thirsty for true nourishment.

It is not easy for our modern minds, so obsessed with inner psychological peace to grasp the broader relational peace that Jesus and the prophets longed for. Jesus and our Jewish ancestors understood peace not as a deep breathing exercise but as a holistic way of living; the deepest expression of right relationships with God and other human beings. Peace did not dwell exclusively in one’s heart or soul, or a sensibility inside one’s spirit, but was the linking one’s whole heart, body and mind to the work of lovingkindness, justice, and mercy. In its purest state, a prayer for God’s peace was a personal vow to strive for harmonious relationships with God, ourselves, neighbors, strangers, and people who see the world differently.

Gerhard Von Rod says “When we consider the rich possibilities of “peace” in the Old Testament we are struck by the negative fact that there is no specific text in which it (peace) denotes the specifically spiritual attitude of inward peace... We are forced to say that “peace” is an emphatically social concept” (adapted) I wonder, is it spiritually selfish to long for inner peace, if we are unwilling to do the harder work of making real-life peace? Are we ready to die to selfish ambitions, the need to win, and our longing to be right, and instead pay the price of living as the true children of God? (Matthew 5) Do we fiercely defend our treasures, privileges and perspectives and then wonder why there is no inner peace nor a sense of harmonious relationships with ourselves, neighbors, strangers and opponents? (James 3&4)

Psalms 85 deeply captures the inseparable unity of longing for inner peace and being committed to doing the work of making peace with God, ourselves, family, neighbors, strangers, and enemies. The Psalmist proclaims “God speaks peace to the faithful ones. Don’t return to foolish ways. God’s salvation is very close... Faithful love and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss. Truth springs up from the ground; ethical living gazes down from heaven. (Psalm 85) God’s peace-giving presence is not disembodied from God’s peace-making reality. Are we adorning our lives with truth, loving-kindness, justice, empathy and ethics? Are our pilgrimage songs feel-good anthems or the daily soundtrack of our working to bring peace around our tables and across every dividing line? Do we sing of Christ’s holistic peace- “who is our peace and has broken down every hostile dividing wall”? (Ephesians 2) Do we center our souls in God’s peace in order to escape into a happy “Jesus” bubble for a few minutes or to learn the dance steps that help bring Heaven’s peace to earth?

Let us pray an improvised prayer of peace-making from Isaiah & the Psalms. “Oh Lord, we long for the day when Nashville, Colorado Springs, and Moscow will sing, “Come, let’s go up to the Lord’s mountain so that God may teach us God’s path and ways. But today we come still learning God’s rhythms, steps and moves. Let the light of God’s judgment shine on us- shine on me and my disputes. Help me beat my sharp swords

and words into plows and pruning tools. Teach me to feed people's bodies and souls instead of winning my little wars. Come, house of Jacob, house of Mohamid, house of Buddha and house of Jesus: let's walk by the Lord's light. Oh my beloved siblings in Christ, House of Jesus, let us sing of peace, longing for it, working for it, learning peace-making's best moves. Let us stretch out our wings to shelter those longing for lodging, lunch, justice, and hope. Come Lord Jesus, God's beloved, born in a cattle stall, teach us to stretch out our arms as you did for us, risking being pierced by the sharp words or crowned with disfiguring thorns, so that your peaceful embrace might break down those vile and violent walls we so easily throw up against each other. Come Lord Jesus teach us the songs of inner peace and steps of actual peace-making. Teach us how to gracefully dance with our families, neighbors, strangers and enemies, as you shape us into peacemakers, who harmoniously follow your gracious lead and thereby remake this world with our steps. Come Lord Jesus, teach us your songs of Peace. Amen