

Restoring Peace

It seems an unlikely mix at first glance. In this waiting time of the year, we engage in all sorts of pomp and circumstance in the memory of a child born poor, in a borrowed space to landless parents who would shortly be immigrants with their son to another land. We call on each other to adore this child, this *Gesu bambino*, this baby Jesus. We call him Lord and King and hail him as God's anointed and we mix in the most outrageously impossible vision from some six hundred years before his birth about a fabulous Peaceable Kingdom when predators and prey live together in a warm and fuzzy Disney cartoon sort of world. It seems little wonder that a well-known literary character often encountered at this time of year sneered and called it all a humbug. What possible relevance can these ancient tales have on our lives? How, in the midst of a world constantly at war, can we proclaim a day of peace? What is it that we imagine we see dimly shining through the fog of war and the smog of brokenness that so often fills our lives?

Perhaps we should consider first just what it is we mean by peace, our watchword for the day. It has become a slippery concept in this age when "Peacekeepers" means a heavily armed military contingent enforcing a stoppage of armed conflict between parties in a land far from their own or even a fight of those parties against the peacekeeping force itself. In times less given to word-smithing and "spin," we would call those peacekeepers an occupying army. This was the basis of the famous *Pax Romana*, the peace enforced by the Roman Empire, and it is now the basis of the *Pax Americana*. But this is not peace in the way that our Scriptures mean it.

Shalom is the word in Hebrew, a very familiar word to us here at Good Shepherd. It is, lest we forget, not a word to describe a cessation of hostilities, enforced or otherwise, but a word that refers to wholeness and safety of all kinds. It is a word that speaks of the removal of anxiety, the dismissal of fear. To be in a state of shalom is to be in harmony with neighbor, with self and with the Creator. For me, the most powerful image of shalom in the Bible comes from the prophet Micah, in words which, in part, echo our reading from Isaiah last week: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid."

With this definition of peace, a full expression restored from the truncated version for which we have been encouraged to settle by those who prefer others to live in anxiety for their own purposes, let us turn to an examination of the vision of Isaiah of the one who will bring about this peace. As our teens were studying this morning, the lectionary passage actually begins in the midst of a longer prophecy in Isaiah. Isaiah is warning that, although God used the Assyrians to execute judgment on the failed Northern Kingdom, the Assyrians and all mighty nations stand to be cut down like great trees in their turn should they not live in the way of God. "The lofty will be made low," the prophet cautions. But God does this, he continues, in order to make way for the one who will lead the people with righteousness. A green shoot will spring up from the desiccated trunk of the Jesse tree, a true heir of David, the king after God's own heart.

Isaiah lists the virtues that will distinguish this new king from so many others. The spirit of God will rest on him; he will live his life in the way that God intends for all humans to live and those who see him will know that God is with him. He will exhibit wisdom and understanding and he will delight in what Isaiah calls "the fear of the Lord." It has gone out of fashion to talk about "the fear of the Lord" and I think in many ways that is a good thing. It is far, far better in these

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often frightening times to focus on the love that God extends to all. But I also wish we were more comfortable talking about the fear of the Lord, for no other word, it seems to me, whether it be awe or respect or reverence or any other word, quite captures that sense of how different God is from us, of how amazing God's power is and how amazing it is that God should take note, not just of God's creation in general but of each one of us in particular. And not just take note, but consider and know and love us in our particularity, becoming personally open to us, welcoming each of us as God's beloved. The created cannot fully understand the Creator, can never really come close, and we often fear that which we do not understand. Many mystics who have been blessed with an immediate experience of God report both a sense of God's unconditional love and of God's immeasurable power. As the writer of Hebrews wrote, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

But however we describe our emotional response to our experience of encounter with the Creator, I think it is safe to say that it is a powerful inducement to humility. When we consider the greatness of God, we naturally turn to our own sense of finitude and from there it is a short step to our realization of our solidarity with even the weakest of our fellows, the ones whom Jesus called "the least of these." As we recognize ourselves in them, we feel anew the call to reach out to them in love. It is precisely here where we can most identify with the one of whom Isaiah speaks, the one who will usher in the era of Shalom.

"He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear," says Isaiah, "but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." We should not be surprised to hear justice described as blind. Since the end of the Fifteenth Century, artists have commonly portrayed justice personified as a woman with a blindfold. The idea, of course, is that a show of riches should not influence the judge. If justice is deaf as well, neither can eloquence. Only the pure facts and the balance of the scales are to decide a case. Of course this concept is at least seemingly mocked in current society, where the ability to spend money freely on well-spoken lawyers and experts often appears to affect decisions. I am put in mind of some of our homeless friends who are eligible for certain governmental aid programs or for private insurance claims. Standard practice for some agencies and corporations is to automatically deny an initial application, hoping that the claimant will give up, as so many do. Those who persist are forced into hiring a lawyer and undergoing a long and expensive process to gain the benefits meant for them, much of which are then soaked up in paying off their legal assistance. Talk about humbugs!

In the realm of Isaiah's promised king, however, no such shenanigans will be allowed. Instead, he will "decide with equity for the meek of the earth." The word "equity" may fall strangely on our ears this morning. Perhaps the most common usage of the word these days is as a real estate term. Equity in our homes is the value of the property minus the outstanding mortgage balance; the basis for the now-infamous equity loans that have created havoc for many. The number one definition on the web also has to do with finance. Equity, it says, is "Ownership interest in a corporation in the form of common stock or preferred stock. It also refers to total assets minus total liabilities, in which case it is also referred to as shareholder's equity or net worth or book value." Got that? If you want to get really technical, "equity is the residual claim or interest of the most junior class of investors in assets, after all liabilities are paid. If valuations placed on assets do not exceed liabilities, negative equity exists." In my own career, Equity has usually

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been a reference to the Actors' Equity Association, the labor union representing performers and stage managers of the live stage. As of 2010, there were approximately 49,000 members, some 90% of whom would have been unemployed at any one time. Talk about the poor and needy! None of this, of course, has anything to do with our passage in Isaiah.

What Isaiah has in mind is a definition that has become, alas, almost archaic in English. If you Google the word as I did, you will go nearly halfway down the page before you encounter this: "The state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair." A little deeper digging will reveal that "Equity is the name given to the set of legal principles, in jurisdictions following the English common law tradition, which supplement strict rules of law where their application would operate harshly... Equity is commonly said to "mitigate the rigor of common law", allowing courts to use their discretion and apply justice in accordance with natural law." Natural law is how legal scholars define what we might call righteousness – that sense of right and wrong that we understand comes from God.

Equity, then, has to do with the type of justice that goes beyond meting out penalties and assessing fines. Instead, equity is about restorative justice, about putting things back the way they were supposed to be. It is a concept manifested in the year of Jubilee mandated in the Torah. Every fiftieth year, you may remember, the Children of Israel were commanded by God to observe a year in which slaves were set free, debts forgiven and land transferred back to the family which had originally owned it. It was a way to make sure that there was a way out for the poor and needy – that no family would go generation upon generation without land to farm and live on, that debts which crushed all hope could not be built up. It was this ancient custom to which Jesus referred when he quoted Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The year of the Lord's favor was also known as the year of Jubilee, the time of restorative justice.

Can we dare to imagine a world where life was lived in the spirit of Jubilee? What if those who have empathetically looked for ways to share with those who have not? What if safeguards were in place to protect the unwary from the wolves of our society? Do you remember the front page story in the Seattle Times just a few weeks ago? It was about Emiel Kandi, a practitioner of the so-called hard-money lending industry. According to the Times, "It provides short-term commercial loans to people with businesses or real-estate investments who can't get conventional bank loans or have poor credit. Lenders charge high interest rates, typically 10 to 14 percent, and require real estate as collateral." The Times article revealed, "(Kandi) admits he charges borrowers as much as he can get away with — 45 percent interest in one case — and makes it clear to them that if they fail to comply with the loan agreements, he will take their property. "I am a wolf," he explained."

In Isaiah's vision, the one who brings peace will be the one who brings restorative justice. "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." It is the deepest restoration possible for it is the restoration of the blessed innocence of Eden — that mythic origin of the species in which humankind walked with God in the cool of the evening and knew no fear but only love. It was

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the time of Shalom, peace, safety and wholeness. Esteemed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes this in his commentary on Isaiah: “Shalom is creation time, when all God's creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating. This poem is about the impossible possibility of the new creation!... the old practice of the big ones eating the little ones is not the wave of the future....The rightly governed world will indeed be detoxified, no more a threat to the poor, the meek, the children, the lamb, the kid. The new world will indeed be safe for the vulnerable.”

This is why we pause for a day proclaiming peace as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of the Christ child. In the vulnerability of the *Gesu bambino*, we remember how the man Jesus was vulnerable – vulnerable in his humility before God, vulnerable to his friends as he knelt to wash their feet, vulnerable to the wolves of Rome and the Sanhedrin as he allowed them to take him, to beat him and even to kill him. We say in our faith that in these acts of Jesus, God Godself became the vulnerable one for us, suffering the worst for humanity so that we could experience the best of God, the peace of God which passes all understanding. As we share of the bread and the cup which we use to symbolize the sacrificial gift of Jesus, let us pledge ourselves anew to be instruments of the Shalom of God, reaching out in love to those even more vulnerable than ourselves and giving thanks to God for the day of peace which has dawned in our hearts and for the fulfillment of which we are called to work every day. Let us rise and sing and come to the table of the Prince of Peace.