

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT I Will Seek Your Good

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122

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Sunday, December 5, 2010

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The text for today's sermon is Psalm 122. You might ask, why preach on a Psalm on the second Sunday of Advent? My first answer is because I love to preach on the Psalms; so there's that. More importantly, this Psalm reminds us of our calling to pray for and take action for peace, which is relevant as we prepare for our celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace.

The Old Testament word for peace, *shalom*, has at its root meaning the idea of wholeness or completeness made of disparate pieces coming together in an integral way. When all the pieces fit together into one whole, working together, the individual has integrity, the church has harmony, a nation has unity. This shalom is a God-given vision we must never lose sight of, lest we be lost to cynicism that things can never be better. In the New Testament, when Jesus and others speak of peace, the idea is expanded to the kind of peace that grows from the inside out, from the individual response to the person of Jesus, to a corporate response that ushers in a new order, known as the Kingdom of God.

Psalm 122 is one of the Psalms of Ascent, otherwise known as pilgrim psalms that express the experience of those making a journey uphill toward Jerusalem to give honor and thanks to God. In Psalm 122 we find a prayer for peace. In the first two verses the pilgrim makes the pronouncement that he and his company have finally arrived, after a very long journey. He says in verse one, *I was glad when they said to me "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"* In other words, "I knew it would be worth the trip!" And indeed it was! Just to see the city is a joy!

In verse two he addresses the city personally, *Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.* It's like when you have driven eight hours on Christmas Eve to visit family, and you pull those bags out of the trunk, set them across the threshold, and announce, "Mom, Dad...we're home," and hugs are given all around. There is just something about an arrival that is reason enough to celebrate, and for the psalmist to address the city as a friend, "O Jerusalem! We're home!"

There is no perfect translation for the word "Jerusalem," but many take it to mean "foundation of peace" or "possession of peace." This is, of course, ironic, considering the bitter conflicts that have surrounded the city over the centuries. Some believe that when Jerusalem finally experiences peace, the world will know peace. In repeating the name of the city over and over again, the psalmist poetically reinforces the sound of the word itself in our minds, connecting the idea that the peace of Jerusalem is linked to our own wholeness and integrity before God. To pray for Jerusalem is to pray for ourselves and for our world.

In verses three through five, the voice shifts from the second person to the third, with praise for the city itself. Verse three says, *Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together.* There is something interesting to notice here. Commentators point out that that word "bound" as in "bound firmly together" is a word not typically used in reference to cities or buildings in the Bible, but rather to communities of people. Right there, the psalmist is giving us a clue that the peace that is implied here is less about real estate, and more about the people who inhabit the real estate.

This makes sense when you read what follows in verse four: *To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.* I love this notion that what brings all the tribes, all God's people, together is a call to gather in one place to offer thanks. The very act of giving thanks to God has the effect of pulling us out from our self-preoccupations to see others around us, to truly notice them and to express love and care for them.

This noticing, loving, and caring, when we are at our best, leads us to justice, to the right treatment of God's people, and to granting the right balance of resources to those who are vulnerable. See verse

five, *For there the thrones of judgment were set up, the thrones of the House of David.* The psalmist is drawing on the notion that David's rule was intended to reflect the rule of God in that place, and that the judgments of his governance were intended to reflect God's concerns on the earth for all his people.

In the final section of this psalm, verses six through nine, the word peace is repeated three times again, *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.* Then there is a shift back to the second person, addressing the city. *"May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."*

Isn't it interesting that in verse eight the psalmist is praying for the peace of Jerusalem? For what purpose? Why? For whose sake? *For the sake of my relatives and friends.* This means that if there can be peace in Jerusalem, my family and friends can know security. They will be protected from harm. Even today, people are praying for peace in Jerusalem so that mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, children and friends can know protection from harm. People of every walk of life and background long deeply for this peace and protection.

Finally, in verse nine, for what else does he pray? *For the sake of the house of the Lord our God.* In other words, simply because God has chosen to dwell in this place, what? *I will seek your good.* The psalmist means that he will seek the good of Jerusalem. He also makes clear that to seek Jerusalem's good means to seek the good of relatives and friends. I would add, to seek the good of the relatives and friends of all people. We seek this good because God dwells in this place, because God dwells among us.

John Wesley is said to have exhorted, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." Little Anne Frank wrote these words, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before beginning to improve the world." This is sage advice; a life which is offered for the good of others is a life which is given for God's shalom.

This past week I was looking through an art book, as I am wont to do, and I came across a picture of Marc Chagall's stained glass window titled *Peace* which is set in the United Nations Secretariat Building in New York. Chagall was a Jewish artist who depicted numerous biblical themes in his work. Many of these are found in stained glass windows in great churches and in various locations around the world, including Jerusalem.

If you know Chagall's work you know that it's not exactly representational in composition of subjects, but reminds you of the way ideas and images might come to you in a dream, in meditation, or in prayer. This particular window is predominantly blue, reminiscent of the blue used on the ceilings of medieval churches to portray the heavens. And throughout are pictures of various individuals and animals that suggest Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, as well as mothers holding their infants, men and women with smiles playing with children. Those particular images remind me of verse eight of Psalm 122, *For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."*

And then, interestingly, and typically for Chagall, even though he is Jewish, there is a cross with Christ in an upper corner. To the right there is a scene of people pouring out, it appears to me, from Jerusalem, all turning toward one another, in conversation and embraces. In the center of the whole scene is a child, whose arms form a circular embrace, and whose vertical figure forms the stem for a collection of roses that surround his head.

What I love most about Chagall's work is that his images are somehow beyond my control to master or put in place. When I look to his paintings, or his windows, I'm really witnessing a vision from his own, very creative, mind's eye. Things are not orderly or linear, but they are also not chaotic. Everything is where it is for a purpose. Chagall is a master of composition. It's just that to enjoy his paintings or windows you have to give yourself over to his vision and, in this case, to the image of peace which he has crafted for your own mind's eye to see inwardly....and eventually to reflect outwardly in your own way. In this way, you are invited to participate in the theme.

He puts all the elements before you—the lion, the lamb, the cross, the children, the crowds in embrace--

and requires that you, the one who is experiencing them, take them to your own heart and mind, so you can reflect outwardly what you have first internalized. It is such a vision that the pilgrim is celebrating here in Psalm 122. He is rejoicing. He is celebrating. He is praying for peace. He knows he does not have full control of all the pieces that must come together for Jerusalem to be whole, but he has been presented with all the pieces, as have we. Thus he prays. We pray as well, do we not, that God would help us to put them together? That he would help us place our trust in his presence in the house of God which foreshadows God's very presence in the person of Jesus.

If we would know his peace, we must do our part to put the pieces together...from within our own understanding, from within our own church, from within our own nation, then outward to the world, which God has made for us to enjoy together and not to fight over. We must take in his peace, his very presence, if we would honor the Lord, and we must say to one another, "I will seek your good." Then follow through with good.

Recently we had some family in town to visit and we decided we would sit down with the kids and watch, for the very first time, the Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. What a remarkable movie that is. Perhaps like you, I always cry tears of joy and relief at the end. Mostly because the movie takes you through quite a roller coaster of emotions, doesn't it? It's rated G, but I'm not sure that's the right rating for the movie. It's really a psychological drama with a holiday theme. There's violence, strong language. The protagonist, George Bailey, is forever taking others by the lapels, and shaking them up with shouted tirades. It's the story of a man who sacrifices his own dreams for the sake of his family and the people of his town, and suffers deeply for it.

Of course, you know, he discovers how blessed he is at the end, but only after we've witnessed him verbally abusing his wife and children, falling into drunkenness in the local bar, flirting with a woman (not his wife), crashing his car into a tree, punching a police officer in the jaw, and finally jumping off a bridge into freezing water. This is R-rated material and deals with some very difficult situations. When I was watching the movie, with this psalm in the back of my mind, I thought that the peace we long for within ourselves, and among each other, isn't easily come by.

People have inner turmoil because of deep, personal hurts sustained from others they love, or as the result of losses not easily overcome. Family members grow in conflict because of generations of hurts passed on from father to son, from mother to daughter. Nations are at war because of long histories of slaughters, rapes, and senseless killings. Peace does not come about because someone strikes up a song of *Kumbayah!*

Our Savior knew this when, as recounted in Luke 19, he approaches Jerusalem, where he will experience torture and persecution. Luke 19: 41 reads, *As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side."* Indeed, Jerusalem was overtaken by the forces of Rome just a few years later. The temple was ransacked and its holy treasures stolen for the Roman Emperor's prize. The reason Jesus wept is because the people did not recognize on that day the things that made for peace.

Do we? Should he still be weeping for us? What will it take for us to pray for Jerusalem, to pray that all people would come together in the presence of God to give thanks, to release our hold on the wrongs of the past, to seek justice for the weak? What will it take, but for us, this Advent, this Christmas, to look to one another, and say, "I will seek your good."

God has sought your good completely in giving you his Son. Will you seek his good by making peace with your neighbor, your mother, your father, your wife, your husband, your child, your friend? God has said to us, "I will seek your good." Now it is for us to say and live shalom for one another, because of his presence and for his sake.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

