

December 6, 2020 Sermon
Rev. Corinne Freedman Ellis
Macalester Plymouth United Church

The prophet Isaiah always has a challenging word for us, and today's reading is no different. This comes from the section of the book called Second Isaiah, the portion of the book written after the Babylonian exile. These are a people in need of healing and reconciliation. On this Sunday when we celebrate and recognize peace, I invite you to listen for images of peace in this scripture reading, and images that perhaps run counter to what you think of when you hear that word.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 1-11, adapted from the Inclusive Bible:

"Comfort, O Comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem's heart, and tell it that its time of service is ended, that its iniquity is atoned for, that it has received from the Lord's hand double punishment for all its sins."

A voice cries out, "Clear a path through the wilderness for the Lord! Make a straight road through the desert for our God! Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low; let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges become a valley! Then the glory of God will be revealed, and all humankind will see it."

The mouth of God has spoken! A voice commands, "Cry out!" And I answer, "What will I say?" – "All flesh is grass and its beauty is like the wildflowers: the grass withers and the flower wilts when the breath of God blows on them. How the people are like grass! Grass withers, and flowers wilt, but the promise of our God will stand forever."

Go up on a high mountain, you who bring good news to Zion! Shout with a loud voice, you who bring good news to Jerusalem! Shout without fear, and say to the towns of Judah "Here is your God!" Lord, O Sovereign One, you come with power, and rule with a strong arm! You bring your reward with you, and your reparation comes before you. Like a shepherd you feed your flock, gathering the lambs and holding them close, and leading mother ewes with gentleness.

May these words be to us our light and our life.

Thanks be to God.

When I think about peace, this is an image my mind conjures up right away. Here is my weighted blanket, purchased at the end of March of this year, designed to soothe pandemic anxiety and help me sleep better. It definitely works. I'm snuggled up cozy here on my couch with a cup of chamomile tea, wearing my comfiest clothes, and this candle is called "Simmered Cider," and that's exactly what it smells like. I'm cozy, my heart is beating slowly, I feel totally relaxed, I'm pretty much ready to fall asleep.

...that is, until Phoebe wakes up from her nap. The thing about this kind of peace, the kind that comes from perfect comfort, is that it's fleeting. We can get stuck thinking peace is impossible if this is our vision, because this simply isn't what our lives look like right now. For most of us, life is pretty chaotic. There is so much that is outside our control. And to bring our world peace, and our souls peace, we need a lot more than a cozy hideaway.

The writer of this portion of the book of Isaiah is writing from after the Babylonian exile. The people of Israel were torn away from all they knew and sent to live away from their temple, away from their people, away from the place where they believed their God lived. There was no coziness, no hiding, no escape. And the only way to find their way back to that comfort again was to do the hard work of rebuilding and reconciliation. They couldn't go back to the way things had been - they could only move forward into a new way of being. A new way of finding peace. A new way of building a life with people who had wronged them. And that is *hard* work.

I hear the familiar words at the beginning of this text: "Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God." I hear in that verse the ways we are all yearning desperately for comfort right now. And I hear in myself the desire for comfort. But God's voice doesn't stop there. God's voice speaks again: "Clear a path through the wilderness for the Lord! Make a straight road through the desert for our God! Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low; let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges become a valley! Then the glory of God will be revealed, and all humankind will see it."

This is a God calling for peace, but not the simple kind. This is a call to the deep, hard, beautiful work of transformation. The work that Jesus's coming into the world symbolizes. The work we are all called to do in these difficult days. In the wake of the election, I have heard so many please for civility, for putting the past behind us, for saying goodbye to the ugliness of the last four years. And I'm all for clearing a path through the wilderness where God's peace can travel through, and making a straight road through the desert for God to move within and among all of us. I am all-in for reconciliation. But filling in valleys and flattening mountains is messy work. It's hard work. It takes a long time. It doesn't always look or sound like it's going the way we want it to. But it's worth it.

So what does it look like to make a path for God's peace? I think of one story that is so often shared, the story of the Christmas Truce of 1914, a World War I tale of American troops and German troops ceasing fire for a day and singing *Silent Night*, each in their own language, across the battlefield. It's a touching story and it looks pretty and it brings tears to my eyes to even imagine it. But that's not a story about peace. That's a story about a temporary cease-fire. Tensions escalated and the fighting continued in some places later in the day on December 25th. The leaders with decision-making power were not moved by this act of subversion undertaken by the soldiers, as beautiful as it was. The fighting continued for four more long years.

I contrast this story with another Christian-holiday-named world event: the Good Friday Agreement that took place between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on that fateful day, April 10th, 1998. The violence in Northern Ireland had been raging since the late 1960s and this agreement largely put an end to it. Many of us have heard of this agreement, but there isn't a beautiful image, no single story that carries it home. This agreement, between multiple political parties in Ireland and between the Irish and British governments, between unionists and nationalists, between Catholics and Protestants, between people who had been

escalating attacks against one another for the better part of 30 years - this agreement was not glamorous.

It took years of painstaking conversations, compromises that left neither side truly happy but both ultimately satisfied, the creation of institutions and roles and procedures to manage relationships and healing. It wasn't perfect, and tensions and violence didn't stop completely even after the overwhelming popular citizen vote to approve the agreement and its implementation in 1999. But for the most part, it worked. It worked because people showed up day after day committed to the work, undeterred by disagreement, with one singular goal in mind: peace.

God does not promise us an easy peace. But God does promise us something. In this reading, we hear four beautiful promises, as identified by Luther Seminary Hebrew Bible professor Michael J. Chan:

- “God comes with power and rules with a strong arm.” I hear this promise as a beautifully subversive invitation to reimagine power and strength, as we await a God who came to earth with power and strength as a tiny baby in a manger.
- The second promise: “God brings God’s reward with God, and God’s reparation comes before God.” I hear this promise as a reassurance that while we may struggle to make amends, God has the power to reconcile us to one another, and we can turn to God for that possibility.
- The third promise: “Like a shepherd, God feeds God’s flock.” I hear this promise as a reminder that we are never in this alone. God nourishes us and fills us; God’s presence and Word and Spirit fuels us for peacemaking.
- And the final promise: “God gathers the lambs and holds them close, and leads mother ewes with gentleness.” Ultimately, God cares for us. God cares for us as we struggle to make it through these difficult times and these divided days, God cares for us as we grapple with how to be present to our families or lead at work or strive for this peacemaking work in any facet of our lives. God’s promise is here for us.

So I still like coming back to my comfortable couch, and my good book, and my cup of tea, and my nice-smelling candle. It is important to cultivate inner peace in the ways we can. But this Advent, I am committing myself to doing hard things, even scary things, to co-create a different kind of world with God. One where we won't need to climb under weighted blankets to finally feel peace. I hope you'll join me. Amen.