

Meditation – “Journey into Peace”

Sunday, December 10, 2023

Scripture – Isaiah 40:1-5, Mark 1:1-8

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 40:1-5. Disasters, *as in the Middle East today*, make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure. In the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; it occupied the land for fifty years.

The exquisite poetry of Second Isaiah, beginning in chapter 40, emerges in the decades following the invasion, like a healing, life-creating song. Second Isaiah puts aside blaming and accusing speech, bursting out, instead, in lyric poetry of comfort, hope, and joy. This prophetic word is their anchor. Though everything else fails, God’s word endures forever. The people wait for their reliable and loving God who prepares the way and who comes to lead them home. Listen now as God speaks to us in this time and place.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken..." Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:1-8. The good news of Mark’s Gospel begins **not** with a birth story of Jesus (as in Matthew), not with the birth story of John the Baptist (as in Luke), and not with the beginning of time (as in John). Rather, the good news of the Gospel of Mark begins with a hearkening back to the words of the prophets and to an introduction of John, the Baptist who prepares the way for the “good news of Jesus Christ” with an invitation to journey into peace, with a call for repentance, for ethical renewal, and for a new beginning in baptism. Hear now God’s Holy word.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight," " John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. John proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but this One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Amen.

The title of the meditation: "Journey into Peace"

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, as we prepare for Christ, give us the courage to journey into peace. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A journey into peace is not a reference to the charmed life. Peace, that sense of wholeness and well-being, that inner confidence of knowing who we are and to whom we belong, occurs amid danger and disappointment and unexpected interruptions along uneven ground and the rough places of the roads we travel. Who among us can venture life and not experience and witness the turmoil that is a part of our broken world?

The way of peace and the gift of faith, according to the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, is learning to be content in whatever our circumstances. Whether we have a lot or whether we have a little, in the best of times and the worst of times, we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us.

All is well with our souls, not because we have never known sorrow or disappointment. All is well with our souls because of the good news proclaimed by John, the Baptist in the wilderness who prepared the way for *the forgiveness of sins* through the One who joined us in our humanity, who experiencing the joys, the sorrows, and the injustices of this life, who healed the sick, who advocated for peace, and who conquered death by dying on a cross.

John Philip Newell reflects on this journey into peace in his book *A New Harmony*. He writes *knowing and naming brokenness is essential in the journey toward wholeness. We will not be well by denying the wrongs that we carry within us...Nor will we be well by downplaying them or projecting them onto others. The path to wholeness will take us not around such awareness but through it.*

A little more than a decade ago when I led a retreat in New Harmony, Indiana, I was reintroduced to the writings of Paul Tillich whose ashes are interred there. Westminster is planning a spiritual retreat at New Harmony in May of 2024. Tillich is regarded as one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. As a German pastor and theologian, Tillich spoke out against the Nazi movement. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Tillich was dismissed from his seminary position. Reinhold Niebuhr, another influential theologian of the 20th century who was the focus of our Adult Ed Forum in November) visited Tillich in Germany that summer and urged him to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, which he did.

Paul Tillich was best known for his ability to integrate theology and psychology. In his classic book, *The Courage to Be*, he identifies three anxieties that come with being human: First, the anxiety of our mortality...*For each of us there is a time to be born and a time to die.* Second, the anxiety of meaninglessness...*At some point, our inner voices ask what is the purpose of our lives?* Finally, the anxiety of our morality; an acknowledgement of our brokenness...*How can I make amends for the things I have done wrong and the people I have hurt?*

Tillich's observation is that human beings cause themselves more pain and unhealthy (neurotic) anxiety by acting out to avoid these normal anxieties that are a part of the human experience. We busy ourselves with tasks that serve as distractions and we participate in behaviors that are destructive and abusive rather than risk the inner journey into the quiet places of solitude where peace, forgiveness, and wholeness are found.

We have the *courage to be*, according to Tillich, because we are loved by a strong, yet gentle God who understands what it is to be human and have anxiety, being born in the Christ child. We have the courage to die, because we belong to the God who conquered death by dying on a cross.

We have the *courage to live with meaning* because, as written in Isaiah and as sung in Handel's Messiah that many of us heard last night, we have a God who lifts every valley, who makes low every mountain, who levels the uneven ground and who smooths the rough places, creating a highway through the wilderness of our lives. We have a God who speaks tenderly to us in the places we are held captive and hold ourselves captive. We have a God who heals our transgressions and renews our strength on the journeys we travel into peace. When we recognize the broken places within ourselves, we are renewed to bring healing and comfort to the broken places within our world.

A dear colleague from St. Louis, the Reverend Nancy Wagner, has a beautiful glass rock sitting on the windowsill above her kitchen sink with the word *tranquility* written on it. The first time I saw it, what caught my eye was the fact that this tranquility stone was cracked, a poignant and practical reminder that our journeys into peace do not preclude the brokenness that is a part of life.

May we walk the journey into peace with grace, confident we do not walk alone because the One we call Emmanuel is with us. Amen.

.