

Sermon – “Journey into Peace”
Sunday, December 22, 2013
Scripture – Isaiah 7:10-16, Luke 1:57-80
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Our first reading on this fourth Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 7:10-16. This passage continues the confrontation between the prophet Isaiah and the King of Judah, who is in a foreign policy crisis. The King’s refusal to accept the prophet’s invitation to ask for a sign at first appears to be an act of piety. Israel has long known the command “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” However, Isaiah rightly understands the king’s refusal to ask the difficult question as a way of avoiding the journey into a peace that will save the nation he leads. If he asks the question, he will be obligated to revise his policy. Rather than face his own brokenness and the need for change, the king continues on a path of self-destruction.

The sign of a child born to a young woman puts everything into perspective. The prophet reorganizes the fearful drama of pending war around this baby whose presence and name Emmanuel asserts the importance of “God with us” in the public arena and in each of our lives. Listen now for God’s word. (Read Isaiah 7:10-16.)

Our second scripture reading is Luke 1:57-80. Today, we continue our journey to the manger through the lens of Luke’s gospel, as we take a closer look at the events surrounding the birth of John, Jesus’ cousin. The same angel Gabriel who visited Mary visited Zachariah, John’s father to bring the good news of Elizabeth’s unexpected pregnancy. Last week we reflected on the visit between these two expectant mothers and Mary’s song.

Zachariah is struck mute, unable to speak, by the news and his voice only returns in the naming of his newborn son John, which means “God is gracious.” Zachariah echoes Mary’s song, giving thanks for John who will be the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Christ’s ministry, announcing the good news of a Gracious God who guides our feet into the way of peace. Listen now for God’s word. (Read Luke 1:57-80.)

The title of the sermon: “Journey into Peace”

Text: “...to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:79b

Let us pray. Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the gift of silence in each of our lives and for the courage to walk into the way of peace. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

December 7, 1941 the United States of America was speechless. It was a day that changed our nation as well as countless Americans as we were drawn into World War II with an unexpected and surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Frances Fowler Allan writes about that infamous day in “The Story of Westminster.” *Westminster people had just come home from a Communion Service. They had partaken of the elements, listened to the minister’s meditation on “The Cup of Blessing,” and closed with singing, “O Love that Will Not Let Me Go.” At home, their radios burst upon the communion peace with news of Pearl Harbor, presaging America’s entrance into World War II.... One*

hundred and thirty-five Westminster members are on its honor roll of WW11, which hangs on the wall in the East Narthex. Westminster lost five young men in World War II.

This morning I would like to share the story of another Presbyterian, Lt. Commander Werner Bauer, who was Acting Chief Engineer on one of the ships attacked on that day, the *USS West Virginia*. The ship received seven Japanese aerial torpedoes and fortunately the two 2,000 pound bombs that were dropped did not detonate or Werner would not have a story to tell.

Werner shared his story at a Presbyterian Men's fellowship breakfast, something we hope to initiate at Westminster.

What Werner recalls about that day is "There was not time to say much of anything" and he, "like so many others in these moments, wanted something to do, some kind of orders, any kind of orders which might result in saving lives or equipment." Werner was also assigned the task of flooding the ammunition storage magazines, which he was able to successfully accomplish in a team effort and he stayed on board the ship until midafternoon, fighting fires and trying to seal up the ship as tightly as possible to prevent the prevailing winds from fanning the fires within. The ship was hit right before 8:00 a.m. in the morning and although the ship sunk, it was later recovered and restored.

It may seem ironic that a sermon on the journey into peace would begin by remembering this day of devastation and what led to the decision to go to war. There are two reasons:

First, to highlight that when the gospel writer speaks of *guiding our feet into the way of peace*, this 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 in the midst of danger and disappointment and unexpected torpedoes along the roads we travel. Who among us can venture life and not experience the turmoil that is a part of our broken world?

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

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, which John, the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, proclaimed. *God is gracious* and this Gracious God joined us in our humanity, in the wonder and mystery of the Christ child, experiencing the sorrows as well as the joys of this life, and who then went on to conquer death by dying on a cross.

The second reason is because Werner's experience on the *USS West Virginia* sheds light on *the journey into peace*. Where does this road begin and where will it take us? Werner's decision to descent into the bowel of the ship to rescue those who were wounded offers us a map of the way into peace. Not only was it the right thing to do, an act of compassion and mercy, it meant coming face to face with the wounded and broken in his midst. Werner's journey into the bowel of the ship is a metaphor for each of our personal journeys within...into the depth of our inner being, into the silent and broken places within our hearts.

Werner reflected on this life changing moment with these words, *there was not time to say much of anything*. John's father, Zachariah, who came out of the inner sanction of the Temple

was also speechless, when he heard that his wife would bear a son. In retrospect, this was not a punishment as much as an unexpected gift and opportunity to journey within; to enter into the silence of his heart; to listen rather than to speak and to prepare for the arrival of his son, John, the one who would become *the voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Prince of Peace*.

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, confronting the depths of our brokenness before being able to move toward healing.*

Sue Monk Kidd, in her book When the Heart Waits suggests *that religion today too often bypasses the importance of confronting our brokenness on the journey within. She visited a church where the preacher invited people with heartaches and problems to come down the aisle to the altar. "God will take care of what's bothering you right now," he promised, without a word about the desert that lies between our wounds and our healing, as if one arrives at wholeness in the mere time it takes to walk the length of a church aisle.*

My mom and dad would have celebrated their 67th wedding anniversary this past December 7th. They met the year after World War II. My mom grew up in the Christian Reformed Church attending worship twice each Sunday. My father rarely attended church. The first time my mother brought him to worship, the service ended with an *altar call* and my father who was moved, perhaps more by my mother than by the message, jumped out of his seat to begin the journey down the aisle to the altar. My mother grabbed his arm, sat him back in his seat, and said "Where do you think you're going?"

Walking an aisle can be a marvelous thing as long as we acknowledge that the aisle doesn't end at the altar but goes on winding through life. (Sue Monk Kidd) May God, who is gracious, guide our feet into the way of peace. And may we recognize that staying in touch with our brokenness is essential on that journey toward wholeness.

A close friend, the Reverend Nancy Wagner, has a beautiful glass rock sitting on the window sill 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 the tranquility stone was broken, a poignant and practical reminder that our journeys into peace do not preclude the brokenness that is a part of life. May we walk with grace confident that we do not walk alone, confident that the One we call Emmanuel is with us. Amen.