

Peace is ... believing

Isaiah 7:10-16

December 18, 2016

This is what disturbs me ...

We talk about peace. We sing about peace. We pray for peace. We tell the stories of the birth of the Prince of Peace, and we repeat the promise sung by the angels to herald his birth: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth."

It's the whole basis of our Advent sermon series: peace on earth. What does peace on earth look like? Well, what does it look like? Do you see it?

Just this week, while I have been preparing to preach another sermon about peace more than eighty civilians -- non-combatants, bystanders -- including women and children, were shot, summarily executed, in Aleppo by government troops. A young man, Dylann Roof, was convicted of murdering nine African-Americans gathered in a church for Bible study -- for Bible study! -- killed for no other reason than being the wrong color. And our president-elect appointed as head of the Environmental Protection Agency a man who believes the environment needs no protection.

This is what disturbs me: the terrible disjunction between what we say we believe and what is. If we believe God promises peace and if we believe God has already given us the precious gift of the Prince of Peace, then what is going on? This is a crisis for faith, no two ways about it, and if we don't think it's a crisis, then either we're not paying attention or our faith doesn't amount to a hill of beans.

We say we believe God promises peace on earth, but there is no peace on earth. So what do we do? There are four options.

The first option is willful ignorance. We cover our eyes and stop up our ears. We look the other way. Oh, sure, we do hear distressing news, every day, but we just let it roll on over us and then fade away into the distance. We don't hold on to the pain. We don't dwell on it. We move on. We get on with our lives.

We do care about peace, but it is a greatly shrunken notion of peace. Peace is peace of mind, peace for me and mine, which is often an achievable goal. And when we have it, we celebrate it as a happy gift from God ... until somebody gets cancer or until I have an accident or until the horrors of this world -- think 9/11 -- invade our personal space. And so we pray: "Let it not be me! Let the terrors of this world stay away from me!"

Does it work, ignoring the pain? Does it bring peace? I suppose it does let us sleep at night. But what good does it do anybody else? None. No good at all, because we maintain some semblance of peace in our lives only by ignoring everybody else.

That's the first way we can deal with the terrible disjunction: willful ignorance.

The second option is despair. You see it. You see it for what it is. You won't deny the terrors and you can't ignore the pain, and you are left trembling, grieving, angry, afraid.

Like Ahaz and the people of Judah. Their two immediate neighbors to the north, Israel and Syria, formed an alliance against them, and prepared their armies for an invasion. Ahaz, the king, and all his people were "so terrified that they trembled like trees shaking in the wind." The prophet brought them a word from the Lord: stay calm, don't be frightened. But all they could see were two great armies marching against them.

When you are in despair, faith fails you. You don't believe anymore in God's promise. You don't hold out hope for peace. You don't sing the songs anymore or pray the prayers anymore, or, if you do, it's just a sham, meaningless words, meaningless prayers.

Does despair do any good? Bring us any peace? Not at all, but at least we're being honest about the state of the world, even if it is at the cost of our faith in God. Does despair do anybody else any good? Not at all, because a person in despair is paralyzed by fear and hopelessness, literally good for nothing.

Willful ignorance, despair, and idolatry. Idolatry is the third option.

Now, I will need you to pay close attention at this point, for two reasons. Idolatry is much more subtle and much less obvious than willful ignorance or despair, and it's all around us. Idolatry is so pervasive, so common, that we may well not recognize it for what it is.

Let's go back to Ahaz. He was scared, shaking like a tree in the wind, but God gave him a promise: don't be frightened, stay calm, it's going to be all right! The Lord even offered to give Ahaz a sign, any sign at all! Just tell me what you want as proof and I will give you that sign to calm your fears.

But Ahaz refused: "I will not ask for a sign ... I refuse to put the Lord to the test." He refused to put the Lord to the test, because? Because he had other plans. Instead of asking the Lord for a sign, he sent word to Tilgath-Pileser, emperor of mighty Assyria, commander-in-chief of the fearsome Assyrian army: "I am your devoted servant ... come and rescue me." A descendant of David, the leader of the nation of people called God's own, saying to a foreign king: "I am your devoted servant." Idolatry!

Idolatry means putting someone, something, in the place only God belongs. Idolatry means entrusting yourself, giving ultimate allegiance, to someone, to something, other than God. Ahaz would not put the Lord to the test. Would you? Are you ready to put the Lord to the test? To let God prove that the promise is real? Or not, because you are afraid God would fail the test. Are you afraid that if you really put your faith in God on the line, it would be exposed for what it is ... worthless?

Instead, we turn to weapons, defense systems, strategic alliances, security measures, detention centers, restrictive immigration policies. Instead, we put our trust in strong leaders, strong armies, superior wealth, superior intelligence, superior technology. Idolatry!

So does it work? Do these other things in which we place our trust bring us peace? For a while. In limited fashion. Does our faith in other “gods” do anybody else any good? No, not at all, because these other gods only win us a little time and no lasting peace, and the peace they win is merely peace for us, which is not the same as peace on earth.

The fourth option, the one remaining option for facing down the terrible disjunction between what we believe and what we see, is faith. Peace is believing. Believing that what we see does not negate the promise. Believing in the sign the Lord already has given us, the sign of Immanuel, God-with-us, Jesus. Believing that God is with us, choosing to put our trust in God and God alone, in spite of everything we see, because of everything we see.

Does faith do us any good? Yes, faith allows us to live both honestly, seeing the terrors of this world as they are, and hopefully, seeing God, believing God, as God is. Does faith do anybody else any good? Yes, because faith gives us hope to share and something to do, making peace, not by protecting ourselves, but by loving our neighbors.

What does peace on earth look like? Peace is believing. Peace on earth is believing people. And what do believing people do?

Believing people complain. Believing people refuse to tolerate injustice. Believing people refuse to accept a world without peace. When they see injustice, they complain. When there is no peace, they complain, loudly, to God! Job complained. Habakkuk complained. Abraham complained. Moses complained. David complained. Jesus complained. To God!

There is a long tradition of faithful people complaining to God. Calling out God is no sign of a lack of faith, but exactly the opposite. You only call out God if you believe God can and should be doing something. If you don't believe, you don't ask.

Believing people ask and believing people wait. They wait and they wait and they wait and they never stop waiting ... for what will be! To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see, and being ready to wait for as long as it takes.

Believing people complain to God when things are not right. Believing people wait for as long as it takes until God does make things right. And, in the meantime, believing people act. In the meantime, believing people work, tirelessly, to make peace, living as if the peace God promises is already here.

That's the key to faith: living “as if,” living “as if” until it is! It is not faith to hope for a better world, but to live in the meanwhile by this world's rules. It is faith to live already, here and now, by God's rules.

This is what faith does with the promises we have heard these four Sundays of Advent ...

Faith believes God's promise of the day when nations will hammer their swords into plows and their spears into pruning knives and never again go to war and faith lives as if that day is already here ... by refusing to resort to swords and spears!

Faith believes God's promise of the day when wolves and sheep will live together in peace and faith lives as if that day is already here ... by taking down walls and fences and offering friendship to supposed enemies.

Faith believes God's promise of the day when flowers will bloom in the wastelands and faith lives as if that day is already here ... by planting flowers in wastelands, by doing all it can to bring healing to bodies and to souls and to the earth itself.

Faith believes God's promise of Immanuel and faith lives as if that day is already here ... because that day is already here! God is with us!

Do you believe it? Do you believe God is with us? Peace is believing.