

January 14, 2024

Speak...Peace

Jody Slaughter

I met a young mom while we were in Colorado on vacation in 2019. We struck up a conversation and I noticed that she had a new tattoo on her shoulder... still had the clear bandage covering it. It was a picture of five birds rising out of a flame. I learned her story of recent survival with her four girls from a house fire which she believed was set by her abusive ex-husband. She was recovering not only from losing all their material possessions, but also from an abusive marriage and religious cult. We've kept in touch through Facebook and private messaging during the past four years. I thought of her as I reflected upon peace. She wrote this a few months ago:

"It stormed most of the night.

No big deal, right?

Except being out here at a campsite...in a tent! Going on 8 hours now of almost constant downpour. There were times I wasn't sure if the tent was actually going to keep the water out.

I texted the kid's multiple times through the night to make sure they were doing alright.

I just went to their tent to check, and they were all sleeping soundly.

In life, you just do your best, be prepared, make peace with the circumstances outside of your control and trust the process, looking for a way through.

It's critical to make peace with yourself and your circumstances. That's not to say you don't change the things you can change.

Seeing my children sleeping peacefully inspired me."

"Peace...it's critical to make peace," or speak peace or seek peace within ourselves and our relationships. Just as my friend said, that doesn't mean you don't work to bring justice among injustice. Speaking peace is not 'going along to get along'. Speaking peace among creation can indeed be very uncomfortable.

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the conflict doesn't involve violence. Conflict does indeed

come when we speak peace into systems or relationships that are not peace-filled.

Isaiah writes words of a peaceful future during a time of great chaos in Israel. We need these words in our world as chaos continues today on so many levels, but especially as the Israeli-Hamas war continues to end the lives of countless innocent children, women and men.

Isaiah 11:6-9 says,

*In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.*

*The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.*

The cow will graze near the bear.

The cub and the calf will lie down together.

The lion will eat hay like a cow.

The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.

*Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly
snakes without harm.*

*Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy
mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth
will be filled with people who know the LORD.*

(New Living Translation)

If we reenacted this today, it would be filled with conflict. I've never seen these scenes in reality, and I certainly wouldn't ever put a baby near a nest of snakes or put a lion and lamb together in a pen! That would be reckless.

Isaiah prophesied about peace within relationships, between nations and all creation. In this passage he gives the reader images that are occasionally illustrated on Christmas cards...Lion and the lamb...the little child will lead them. God came to earth in human form through Jesus to bring 'Peace on Earth'.

It's God's vision for all creation, peace on earth. This text in Isaiah was written about warring nations. The Israelites were under oppression from the Assyrian nation. Isaiah gives a sense of hope that the Spirit of God will hover over the chaos...just like in Genesis 1 when the Spirit of God hovered over the darkness and God spoke light into the darkness and a vision of a new created order came into being...light and darkness...day and night...two things that don't seem like they can exist together...the lion who lays down with the lamb. Like in the creation story there is a

transformation amongst all creation. This is the way of God to speak peace.

The beginning of this passage in Isaiah starts with, "In that day". I think that reference is similar to what we pray in the prayer Jesus taught us, "thy will on earth as it is in heaven"...this is a vision of "in that day".

This text urges us to speak transforming peace in our praying, our sitting, our solitude, our standing, our self-talk, our moving in and through life as we relate to all creation. Jesus also entered into the world, confronting the religious and cultural systems of the day to usher in authentic peace.

What we know of Martin Luther King Jr., of whom we honor this Monday, is that he and his family entered into the conflict of confronting racism to bring more peace among us. We are all called to speak peace (and often without words) so that justice and grace have the final word.

In our grief support groups here at Prince of Peace we invite peace into a not so peaceful time by seeking to create a safe and confidential space where participants are welcomed to share difficult feelings surrounding the death of a loved one.

I remember in my 20's the first time I was invited to welcome difficult feelings, even embrace my pain. I thought the idea was absurd. Why would I want to embrace my pain? I wondered how peace would come if I processed and felt my difficult feelings? Wouldn't that keep peace away? Just like this scripture in Isaiah seems to not make sense, we could also imagine that peace would not flow by talking about such painful feelings. What we see clearly in our support groups is that if we suppress one feeling it can suppress other feelings as well.

Brene Brown said, *"We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions."*

Often in our support groups we see how when we allow the tears to flow, without apology, then we also laugh authentically together at appropriate times...the joy and sorrow are able to coexist...peace in midst of a not so peaceful time.

Speaking peace to one another and to ourselves comes in many forms. Rarely does it come from someone giving us advice or trying to fix things for

us. Peace comes powerfully by listening, hearing and being heard, validating and being validated.

The last verse in our scripture reading says, "Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD." I wonder how we, as people who seek to know, trust, believe and love the Lord, speak peace instead of hurt? So often we speak hurt instead of peace. What are we missing here? Here's how I knew I was missing something...

Recently I was feeling a lack of peace in a friendship. I did not feel valued by my long-time friend until we had a heart to heart conversation. Listening and having this honest, caring conversation helped me see they didn't feel valued by me either. Peace was able to be restored. Peace in myself and in the relationship was something that I couldn't figure out. That's where our faith enters. I knew it was possible because I see it throughout scripture and even in our reading today...in that day the lion will lay down with the lamb. But I couldn't figure how to bring peace until I sat with the conflict and listened both to myself and to my friend.

A lack of peace feels like darkness or despair. As people of faith we trust in God's Word; the power of possible in the midst of impossible. We call out to the Spirit of God who is among us, hovering over us to bring light into the darkness...to bring peace in the chaos. We cultivate ways of listening with our bodies, minds and souls so we are led to a place of deeper connectivity and we can join in the activity of the Spirit of God to bring peace.

So, some of the best ways to "Speak Peace" is to listen...be still and really listen. Let go of our own agendas and be present to the other person, yourself and to the Spirit of God.

As you cultivate this way of speaking peace through listening, be aware of how listening paves the way for more peaceful, honest, caring, conversations with others and yourself. Consider your own experience of being listened to? Reflect on the times you felt truly heard? How was that for you?

We can also listen in nature by getting outside some each day. If you are not able to go outside

then open yourself to stories of nature or watch and/or listen to outdoor scenes and sounds.

Remember the young mom I met in Colorado in 2019? Even at a distance we have cultivated a way to listen to one another. My recent interaction with her was during a difficult day for me. I reached out to tell her thank you for an encouraging word I read on her social media post. We began to exchange messages which informed me of the experiences she had of speaking peace. She had recently confronted an injustice within the “justice” system. She said she needed to remember she can be a powerful source of peace and that confronting unpeaceful systems takes the voices of many.

We all need one another in whatever battles we face to speak peace in this world.

The prophet Isaiah gives us God’s vision of peace and we are called to usher it into the world.

Let us grow in our listening to God’s Word, others and the voice within so we can best speak peace.

As we check in on and listen to those around us, just as my friend checked on her kids in their tent during that stormy night, we might just be a part of creating a world that is better able sleep peacefully, even in the storms.