

Longing for Peace

Isaiah 9:6-7; Philipians 4:6-9

Jeff Marian

At the beginning of the Biblical story there is a poem about a man and a woman who live in a garden paradise. They live in harmony with one another. The poem says that they were naked but not ashamed, a Hebrew way of saying that they could be fully and completely who they are with one another without shame, or fear of judgement. They didn't need to earn one another's love. It was a given. And they live in harmony with their Creator, walking through the garden together and talking as friends. Like their relationship with one another, they relate to their Creator without shame or fear of judgement. There's no anxiety. No resentment. No striving to earn love and acceptance.

There's a Hebrew word for this way of living and being. It's "shalom." Shalom is often translated into English as "peace" but the word means so much more than a lack of conflict. It means completeness, wholeness, contentment, well-being, even fullness of life. The man and woman in the poem in Genesis live in shalom with one another and with their Creator. It's such a beautiful picture. But if you know the poem, you know that this shalom doesn't last for long. Sin enters into the story, and with it comes guilt and shame and fear. Shalom is shattered like a delicate vase dropped on a tile floor.

And since this poem at the beginning of the Biblical story isn't really about a man and a woman but about all of us, it's as if the poem is saying that we were made for shalom. We know the shape of it. We've tasted it on the tip of our tongue but now it is lost to us. It's like a beautiful dream that fades upon awakening. We catch glimpses of it but we cannot seem to reclaim it in fullness. It escapes us and yet we long for it, don't we? Deep down in our bones we long for shalom. In the midst of a global pandemic, political turmoil, economic uncertainty, global tensions, relational conflict and so much more...we long for peace. We long for shalom. But here's the surprising

truth: we seem to have forgotten that the gift of peace, the gift of shalom, has always been within us. It still is.

From the time I was a little boy I've loved the movie "The Wizard of Oz." I love the music and the munchkins, nasty Miss Gulch, the Wicked Witch, the flying monkeys, and your little dog Toto, too. But it wasn't until I was much older that I understood the profound lesson of the movie. Dorothy's deepest yearning, the ache in her heart, was to return home to Kansas, only to discover that the power to return home had been literally on her feet the whole time. What we long for most is so often within our grasp if we will but have eyes to see it. And that is certainly true of peace, of shalom.

God knows how we long for peace. God planted the yearning within us. And so, long-ago God promised us peace. Listen to the promise from the prophet Isaiah,

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

What a beautiful promise! And God delivered on that promise when a woman named Mary gave birth to a child in a backwater town called Bethlehem. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the Prince of Shalom, the one who has come to rule the world with truth and grace and love. And wherever truth and grace and love rule, fear and guilt and shame cannot win the day. Wherever truth and grace and love rule, there is peace. There is shalom.

That's why the angels announced Jesus' birth with these words, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to everyone who pleases God."

It's why Jesus greeted people over and over again saying, "Peace be with you."

It's why Jesus told his disciples before his crucifixion, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

It's why St. Paul wrote these remarkable words, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which

exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."

Peace – the wholeness, completeness, contentment and well-being for which we long – isn't something we need to pursue or earn. It is the gift that we've been given through Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Which, of course, raises the question, "How do we experience that peace?" And Paul gives us the answer in this verse from Romans 15. Listen carefully, *"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Did you catch it? How do we experience that peace? Through faith. By trusting. Now, let me be clear. Faith doesn't earn us the gift of peace. This isn't some kind of magical transaction in which God determines whether we have faith, or have enough faith, and then dispenses peace to us. We experience the profound peace of Christ when we trust that what God has promised is true.

It's like this. I wear this ring [my wedding ring] because it's the sign of a promise that's been made to me. My wife, Nancy, has promised to love me until death parts us. That doesn't mean she always likes me...but she has promised to love me. If I doubt that promise, I will live with a brokenness of heart and a level of anxiety. I might try over and over again to earn her love or try to be worthy of her love. But if I entrust myself to that promise, then even in the most difficult moments of life when I'm struggling or hurting, Nancy's love for me anchors me. No matter how tumultuous the circumstances of my life may be, at the core of me there is a peace when I have faith in Nancy's promise to love me.

That's what St. Paul is saying in that verse from Romans. We experience peace when we entrust ourselves to God's promises. That we're loved beyond measure, perfectly imperfect in God's eyes. That we are forgiven beyond reason. That we are never alone. That God is always at work for good in our lives. That we are connected to God and one another in ways we cannot fully fathom. That all of creation and history is heading somewhere. Friends, when we entrust ourselves to God, when we believe these things, which are the heart of the Gospel, to be true and true for us, we experience peace. How could you not?

Rob Bell, in his book entitled *Everything Is Spiritual*, writes this:

Gospel is the divine announcement that you are love and accepted exactly as you are, that everything has been take care of, that everything you've been striving to earn has been yours the entire time, that you belong. In exactly this condition that you are currently in, nothing additional required or needed.

That, my friends, is the truth that sets us free. It sets us free from striving, from guilt and shame, for an endless sense of "not-enoughness." And when we believe it to be true for us, when we entrust ourselves to that truth, we experience the peace that has always been ours.

But we aren't just called to experience peace; we are called to be peacemakers. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are called and empowered to create more peace in this world. And how do we do that? By living the way of Jesus. Loving, forgiving, sacrificing, serving. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, *"For Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."* And I think he's right. Nothing makes us feel more complete, whole and contented than knowing that we are truly, unconditionally loved. Without love, there can be no peace.

In 1979 Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize and was asked, "What can we do to promote world peace?" Her answer was simply this: start at home. Love the people in your life, especially those you are closest to. She said, *"So often the idea of peace seems huge and insurmountable, something that begins with a grand gesture. But do we ever stop and consider that the peace that starts in our homes, a peace that seems so domestic and insignificant, can also have deep meaning and importance? That this peace, so easily forgotten amidst the dirty dishes, unfolded laundry and trash night, can help change the world?"*

Peace has always been ours to experience. We don't strive for it. We don't earn it. In fact, we're set free from that way of living. We receive peace as a gift of grace. That's why we're encouraging you to engage in a spiritual practice called Lectio Divina this Advent season. It's a spiritual practice of reading and dwelling in God's Word where we hear the truth that sets us free, the promise, *"Nothing will ever separate you from my love."* And then we take that peace into our day and extend it to others so that, as Mother Teresa said, *"no one ever comes to you without leaving happier."*

So, let's practice dwelling in these words from Paul's letter to the Philippians [Lectio Divina Philippians 4:6-9]