

Sermon

St Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark – 10th December 2017

Advent Two: Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11

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The season of Advent, is a season within seasons. We've lit our candle of peace, marking the beginning of a weeklong journey of peace. We are in the season of peace moving towards to season of joy, to the season love and finally to Christmas. Although like other markers of God-time, these seasons are not confined to eight calendar days, but rather it follows the warp and weft of our own particular and uncontained lives. Perhaps this season can also be a gift of peace to hold us when we don't believe we could ever experience peace again.

My sister Becky died in the season of peace, in Advent 2004. And sometimes when I need it, the season helps remind me, when I need reminding, of the peace that surrounds us all, even and maybe most especially, in times of profound loss.

As many of us would have cherished memories of a unique experience of peace following the death of one we love.

Yet in times of deep disjunction, profound despair, when there has been a rupture with the world you know, and you are left on a blustery hilltop trying to see through the storm, you can feel far from anything that resembles peace.

This is where we find the people to whom the prophet Isaiah is speaking, taken as captives into exile by the Babylonian empire. We are at a point in the story where Israel is divided into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Judah has been demolished by Babylon, Jerusalem has been utterly destroyed, the temple raised to the ground. The people have lost their homes, many have lost loved ones, and they no longer have a place to worship their God. The exile had been foretold to King Hezekiah in the chapter immediately preceding the one we heard today, in which the prophet Isaiah says: the 'days are coming when all that is in your house shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,'

And then according to the structure of the book of Isaiah there is a silence after that prophecy until the next chapter begins, a silence that lasts for 150 years. In the poetry of the book of Isaiah we do not hear the details of what happens to the people. There is simply a devastating silence, but we know from our own time, from our own experiences even, what those who've fled their homeland from the ravages of war are facing.

And suddenly into the silence, God speaks to them 'Comfort, o Comfort my people.' God promises their suffering will end, it is a turning point. Although they are still in captivity, although they still suffer under the same oppressive regime, suddenly there is possibility where there had been hopelessness. Nothing physically has changed and yet everything has changed. Even when everything seems hopeless they are not abandoned. God speaks to them, reminding them who they are.

'A voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.' A voice that knows the wilderness, what it feels like to be in the wilderness of one's life. 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' This is a powerful and somewhat bewildering statement. And it is deeply linked to our own Christian tradition, as we find the phrase is there again, right at the very beginning of the gospel of Mark. Almost in the same breath as the beginning of good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel writer quotes Isaiah, "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 his paths straight." And then enter the messenger from stage left: John the Baptist.

What is this the way of the Lord? How are we to prepare it? And one who has come before - John the Baptist - is bringing people back to God, calling them to mend their ways, repent, change, turn once again towards the light. Be renewed in baptism. John, we are told, is preparing the way, and he is also a fore telling of one who will be the Way, Jesus Christ, the way, and the truth and the light.

And yet this is a lament, a voice crying out in the wilderness...it resonates with us and the state of the world today. There is a deeply human need on all levels, spiritual, ecological, economical – our world is crying out for a way forward. A way of connection. A way for peace. A preparation of the way is a preparation for peace, both inside ourselves and in our world. How to remain restless towards this vision of peace? What images, emotions come to mind when you think of peace? It is a place in yourself? It is more global? Harder to put your finger on? When I think of peace, I think of home in its deepest sense, of feeling and being home. The imagery of Isaiah is a great levelling: the valleys shall be lifted up, the mountains made low, the rough places shall be smoothed. What mountains are on your horizon? What rough places need to be smoothed or soothed? What are the burdens that need to be lifted? How can we have a deepening awareness of God in our own lives? To smooth that path?

And often people who have been through the most harrowing experiences fighting for justice, fighting for their rights as human beings, show us how to see this peace, how to live this peace. They are lights on the hill. Behrouz Boochani the Kurdish journalist who is imprisoned on Manus Island is one such person. His article in the Saturday Paper is a profoundly moving telling the resistance of the men on Manus Island before their forced removal to the new camps in PNG. Many of you would have been following this in the news. I feel as though I could not possibly do justice to Behrouz, but the vision of how the men were caring for each other, their vision of a humanity of fellowship and respect, their peaceful resistance in the face of such brutality of the police and inhumanity of our government. I will bring a copy next week....

Which brings us back to the season of peace...It can fit into different timeframes for everyone this season of peace. It can feel different at different times of our lives. In a way lighting the peace candle, or any of our candles at Advent, is a way to remember and recognise these seasons in ourselves, in our lives, in our world, as well as marking a season that exists beyond us, in God time.

When my sister Becky died, I remember thinking I would never experience joy again. And that night all her friends gathered at our place, there was not a piece of floor space that was not occupied by one of them. I remember sitting on the floor and laughing until the tears ran. And I remember feeling a profound love for them, and a love for the world that I had never experienced before. There was comfort where no comfort was ever expected. My heart was flowing with joy in the midst of grief. An in-breaking of grace, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Amen.