

Opening Our Hearts... with Peace

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Isaiah 2:1-4

Today we have heard again the timeless words of the prophet Isaiah – words that describe his dream of a world where all people will be restored to life and hope and peace regardless of name, color, religion or heritage. Someday, he says, people will stream toward the wonderful mountain of God, where God's word of justice and peace will go forth and prevail. Person will travel with person, nation with nation, and all will find peace. On that day people of the earth will mold the sword into the plowshare and the spear into the pruning hook, and our grim fascination with violence and war will be no more. Wonderful words – words we hear every Advent and Christmas. But can we really imagine such a world? Can we really imagine the blade of the sword transformed into the blade of a plow, a blade used for cutting into the surface of the earth so that new seed can be planted? Can we imagine that seed bringing life and hope to an aching world? Can we imagine putting away our own angry and hurtful thoughts that cut and slice, and in their stead planting seeds of reconciliation, tolerance and understanding? What might it take for us not to learn war anymore?

A New Testament scholar tells a story about a year of study he spent in Germany with his family back in the early sixties. He had been at a meeting in Zurich and was now on a train to rejoin his family in Germany. Anxious to get home, he stopped in the Zurich station just long enough to grab a sandwich for the train. His command of German was iffy at best, so he always tried to find a train compartment with several people already in it so that he wouldn't have to say much. But this train was quite full. He ended up in a back compartment with an elderly woman. He says, "I figured that if I went in there, that would be two, giving me 50 percent of the conversation. Could I handle it? I really had no choice."

"As I sat down I said, 'Nice day,' but she just nodded and stared out the window. I decided to try another German sentence, 'Are you going home?' Again, she turned and nodded. 'Wow!' I thought, 'I know more German than she does!' I grew more bold, 'I'm going to Stuttgart. Where are you going?'

" 'Rostach,' she said. Rostach? That was a city in East Germany, Communist Germany. She told me that she had been able to get travel papers so that she could visit her grandchildren for a month.

I asked, 'Are you a Communist?'

" 'No,' she answered, 'I'm a Christian.'

I said, " 'I'm a Christian. And I'm from America.'

She said, 'Yes, I know.' And we began to talk.

" 'What's it like to be a Christian in East Germany?'

" 'What's it like to be a Christian in America?'

She had a music box. She wound it up and it began to play "Silent Night". She sang a verse. She then invited me to sing along, which I did as best I could. I had that sandwich I had bought and my stomach was starting to growl. I was hungry, but I didn't want to eat my sandwich in front of her. Finally I thought that at least I could share it. But then I ran into another problem. It was a German sandwich and the bread was extremely hard. I couldn't get it into two. I'm banging it over my knee, trying to break it in half. Finally it broke and I was able to share. I hadn't noticed, but in the meantime she had peeled an orange and was extending half of it to me. Half a sandwich; half an orange. We talked of being Christian in America and East Germany. We got to Stuttgart. 'God go with you,' she said. 'And God go with you.' I could have sworn that we shared communion on that train.

"I have often thought of her. I wonder if she has thought of me. One half sandwich and one half orange. It's the Christian way. I now live in Tennessee. Sometimes I think how far it is from Tennessee to Rostach, Germany. Do you know how far it is? I checked the map. It's across a train compartment table. That's how far it is."

I believe this is a story about peace and peacemaking. I realize it may not sound like much in a world of monstrous evil such as the Islamic State, or terrorists in Uganda who kidnap and enslave young girls or those who slaughter children in Pakistan. It may not sound like much in our own country as we once again face difficult issues of race and equal justice under the law, and confront our own prejudices or our own addiction to violence – a year since the murder of children in Newtown and has anything changed? We seem so much more efficient at beating plowshares into swords. And yet, even in my most disappointed and cynical moments, I am not still not ready to walk away from the vision of Isaiah of a world at peace.

It's an old story and a true one. A California couple had grown weary of their house. They decided to sell it and find another. They put it in the hands of a real estate agent. As they began searching for a new home they might like, they also began reading real estate ads to see that they

could find. They stumbled upon an ad for a house that seemed just ideal for them. They eagerly called the listed phone number and, to their great astonishment, discovered they were enquiring about their own house.

It's not hard to picture that family... tired of leaky faucets, too much lawn, an old roof, perhaps even unpleasant neighbors. They wanted a new home, a new location, an escape from the old pressures and problems. It is tempting – just get away from all this and start over. How can there be any hope for peace in times like these? And yet, the fact of the matter is that there is no new house to which we can move, no flawless neighborhood just around the corner, no place to which we can flee and just get away from it all. I keep praying, "Beam me up, Scotty," but it just ain't going to happen.

And Isaiah knows this. He writes to a people who know war and rumors of war all too well. Yet it is right there, in the midst of his people, in the midst of danger and conflict, that he shares his timeless vision of peace. It is precisely in times like these are we are called to do the things that make for peace.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.
Yet in the dark streets shineth, the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight.*

Look where the action of Christmas is focused. Not on some idyllic Christmas card tableau, but on the dirty, everyday streets of Bethlehem, or any city, any place, where hopes and fears compete for territory, any place where women and men seek to decide, "Which way shall I lean? Toward my hopes or toward my fears?" Where does peacemaking begin? Where does change begin? Where does hope begin? Right here, with each of us – in Bethlehem, in Sebastopol.

There is so much I cannot do. There is so much I cannot change. But does that mean I am powerless to do anything? Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard have done a lot of work over the years on teaching people skills of nonviolent spiritual practices, skills that can be opening and transforming. Here is some of what they teach:

- Learn to recognize and respect the sacred in every person including ourselves and every part of creation.
- Recognize deeply who I am, with all gifts and richness and with all limitations, failings and weaknesses.
- Recognize that what I resent in another often comes from my difficulty in admitting that this same reality lives also in me.
- Give up the we-they game. It divides us into good and bad and allows us to demonize the adversary
- See ourselves as part of the creation, remembering that the destruction of our planet is a spiritual problem, not simply a scientific one
- Slow down and be patient. Plant the seeds of love and forgiveness. Slowly we will grow in love, compassion and the capacity to forgive.

You see, the biblical concept of peace is not limited to the absence of war, though our popular concept of peace has frequently been confined to this narrow definition. "Shalom" (Hebrew word for peace) is much richer in meaning. It refers to the concern for blessedness, wholeness, prosperity, safety, welfare, happiness and security for all God's people. It is not private, but collective, social and public. It is all about community and what it takes to build community, not at all otherworldly but very much concerned about what we are doing here and now, in this world, to nurture and build that shalom.

Which brings me back to the train story. Perhaps I cannot single-handedly bring peace to the Middle East or even to the mean streets of American cities. But I can reach across a table, share half a sandwich, break through prejudice and fear and see, not a stereotype, but a person, a beloved child of God looking back at me. We long for transformation and wish it would happen magically before our eyes. But it will not happen without serious thought, effort, sacrifice, conversation and commitment on our part. Swords don't just melt into plowshares. We must hope for it to happen, pray for it, long for it, work for it. Yes, Isaiah's vision of peace is not a spectator sport.

A colleague tells of walking the dusty streets of an Arab village and meeting a young boy playing a flute. He asked to see the flute from which came such lovely music for it seemed so awkward. On examining it, he found that it was fashioned from an old gun barrel. Now that is really beating swords into plowshares. But it makes a deeper point. For there is something each of us can take from our lives and fashion into an instrument through which we can make beautiful music until the deeper harmonies of life are restored and we discover the things that make for peace – within ourselves, within our world, between ourselves and others and with God.