



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Peace be with you? Now?”

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Will Sparks December 7, 2014

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

One of the most ancient rituals in the Christian church is what is known as the passing of the peace. Usually it is done as people prepare for communion and it goes like this. The leader around the table says, "The peace of Christ be with you," and the community replies, "and also with you." Then the community exchanges some sign of peace or friendship with each other—some hand shake, embrace. Originally it was known as "the kiss of peace" and it was literally a kiss that was exchanged (remember, Christianity originated within the demonstrative cultures surrounding the Mediterranean). But in the United Church it has often been hard to see the difference between greeting time and passing the peace. Passing the peace has felt like an opportunity to say hi to friends. But if we pay attention, look around, take the hands of another person, actually look into each other's eyes knowing that behind every pair of eyes there is a soul in search of the genuine peace of God, and then say in all sincerity, "The peace of Christ be with you", well, I think it may actually be an experience of peace. Let's try it.

"The peace of Christ be with you" "And also with you"

The peace of Christ be with you. And today we light the candle of peace as we prepare for the celebration of the one who is said to have come to bring us peace. And I guess my question for the day as a soul in search of genuine peace is, how do we get there, or how do we get on the road to peace? How do we find a place in which the peace of God, divine serenity, a just peace is really with me? How do we get so that we know the peace of God in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls, in our relationships, communities, nations?

That's the real question on this day in which both Isaiah and John the Baptist are reminding us to prepare the way for our God of peace to arrive in our midst, and to prepare in the wilderness. That is the place in which I need to find peace most- in my personal wilderness, in our collective wilderness we create in the conflicting human family.

I will never forget a Christmas letter I got one year that spoke volumes to me about a peaceless wilderness. A friend in Nakusp gave me permission to share this. It was one of those Christmas letters that usually list off all the amazing accomplishments of the year on one page. This one was different. She wrote: "You cannot imagine what life has been like. The ministry of Highways is putting a truck route/by-pass behind our property and through it. Well, they are going to take most of the driveway and .4 of an acre. As a result, we have been waiting since September to see what will happen. It is going through and they are purchasing our house. We signed the papers with them on the 29th of November and we will be out by Dec. 22... Get the picture? We have lived here 22 years... another very unpleasant picture. I collect everything... A worse picture. I have trouble throwing things away... I am highly stressed. In the middle of all this, (wait, there's much much more) we have had new computers installed in our department at work. Up they come from Vancouver to install the new equipment. What? No one wrote down the password to get into the hardware for the new system???? What? The system doesn't work on our telephone lines because they are a 'proprietary system'? What? It is going to take another \$4000 to put the system in? Back down to Vancouver they trod....

So next week, this is what the people want from me: to be in New Denver to set up my office, to be available just in case the new equipment installation happens, to use the rest of my holidays moving into our new place, to get my articles and photos in to the paper, cook, clean the house- I think there's more but my head hurts, my neck and shoulders have turned into curling rocks, and if that isn't enough, my son's ex is taking him back to court for the second time in six months for custody. He needs another 2-3 thousand dollars to do this. I can't believe it. His daughter has been with him for the past 16 months and she is now stable (whatever that means- is she part horse?!) AAAAAHHHHHHH...

All in all, life has been pretty calm- NOT!

May the peace of God be with you. Are we there yet? Prepare the way in the wilderness. Welcome to the wilderness of many expectations, internal and external demands, hopes, longings.

May the peace of God be with you. Yes, and how do we get there? It is a struggle. So many places in the world spiralling out of civil order where people find it a struggle.

May the peace of God be with you. No we are not there yet. And yet there is a mysterious core to the cry of John the Baptist for repentance, and the cry of the people of every place in this world in which the spirals of mistrust and conflict continue to spin out of control, the cry of my friend for some glimmer of calm in her life. They are all in their own way- personally, politically- in the business of preparing the way, setting the stage, being midwives for a peace that comes, when all is said and done, as a miracle- as a gift.

As Roddy Hamilton put it: with John in the wilderness, prepare. Prepare for that membrane to burst and all heaven fall open; new roads in life, new paths through living, new ways of ordering life on earth, new landscapes to grow into. But to get there, there needs to be wilderness, the letting go, the struggle." Sometimes the struggle is a life and death struggle to discover what is essential, and then to taste it. Sometimes it is a life and death struggle to prepare a way in the wilderness of political life. Sometimes it is a struggle to prepare the way in the wilderness of our all too complicated personal lives. Sometimes it is a life and death struggle to discover the love and acceptance of God even includes me. Sometimes it is a life and death struggle to just breath and let go and trust the deep reality of life.

Truth is, the early church had it right when they adopted a practice of passing the peace. The peace we long for is not so much a destination but a practice, a posture we take that puts us in an openness to receive a peace that can only come as a gift. As we prepare to come to God's table of love and acceptance, may the mysterious gift of the peace of God search you out in whatever is your own wilderness, and find you.

The peace of Christ be with you. Amen.