

Morning Prayer- 12/4/11

Isa. 40:1-11

Peace

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

This morning we light two candles to mark our journey through this Advent season. Last week the candle we lit marked our hope in the coming kingdom of our Lord. This week, the candle we light ignites for us a *hope for* and a *realization of* the peace that accompanies the birth of the Christ child.

Advent is not the only time we recognize this peace. We do it each Sunday of the year. Passing the peace is a good ritual practice in our faith community and in many, many others around the world. Each of us practice a bit differently. In my church growing up, we offered what I would classify as the truly Presbyterian peace- decently and in order turning to the persons seated next to you, the ones in front and behind, but no further would you go. In the church I served in Philadelphia, the peace could take up to five minutes, with a much smaller congregation spilling out into the aisles, wary of missing even one person. Here at FPC, I think we bridge the gap— with a whole-hearted peace up and down the aisles near to us, catching as many folks as we can.

This peace that we pass, no matter how we do it— this peace, as the liturgy we sometimes use during session meetings reminds us; is not easy, not half-hearted, and surely not insignificant.

This is the peace being trumpeted here in Second Isaiah to a weary and wary and worn down Judah. Comfort, comfort!, commands our God. Comfort *my people*. Speak tenderly to them. They have served their term. Like prisoners seeing the first glimpses of budding trees not obstructed by bars or barbed wire. Commenting on this text, Kathleen O'Connor says, "Disasters make people numb, afraid and hopeless". After the invasion of Judah by Babylon, the military might of the age, the words of the prophet emerge "like a healing, life-creating song". Like prisoners, despairing and hopeless, the exiles are given space to imagine life that is both full and faithful once again.

Peace is both present in the words overheard by the people and resides in the future these words have given them the grace to imagine. Note how the prophet does this: from comfort for she who has already *served* her term, to cries to "prepare the way" for God the shepherd who *will* soon come to feed and gather her lambs.

This is the peace we acknowledge during this Advent season, as we light the second candle. Peace already achieved by God's grace incarnated, and peace we can only imagine with the coming kingdom.

And boy do we need the reminder. Despite the sign of the season printed on coffee cups and lit brightly in downtown Natchitoches- "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All"- peace eludes us. Abuse continues un-denounced, reconciliation is a farce in the face of long-term ethnic and political clashes, economies continue to crater and shelves at the food bank empty more quickly these days. Peace eludes us and we are like the exiles, who revel in our freedom and comfort just long enough to get bored. And so we wither and fade. Wither and fade from generosity to rely ultimately on greed. Wither and fade from collaboration to rely ultimately on dogma. Wither and fade from community to rely ultimately on self.

And because of this, it is really very hard for us to even wrap our minds around the peace that we hope for in lighting this second candle. But the

good news is this- we wither and fade, and yet the word of our God will stand forever, says the prophet. Abuse will end. Reconciliation will come. Anxieties will cease and all will be full. As exiles this Advent season- this is our message to proclaim, our peace to herald, our hope to come. This whole-hearted, this difficult, this significant peace has already come into the world, in the form of the infant visited by shepherds and heralded by angels. Knowing this, may we have the confidence to go out and sing the healing, life-creating song of comfort and peace offered to all of creation by our God. The peace of God be with you all.