

**Sermon: December 9, 2018 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 40: 1-11**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

In this year's Advent journey, we are following the traditional themes for the four Sundays: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Today, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 4 Sundays, our focus is on Peace.

Peace is a yearning that is both personal and global. We seek to be "at peace" in ourselves, while also praying for a world where wars will cease. Our task is not only to seek peace in our lives, but to give ourselves to God's promise of an entirely new realm – a realm where peace is known not by all, not just by some.

Our starting point in these simultaneous journeys is to return to the Biblical roots of this notion of peace. Peace, in biblical terms, is more than an end to war or freedom from strife, even greater than tranquility or serenity. Peace, in biblical terms, is understood only inasmuch as we understand the marvelous Hebrew word SHALOM, a word that undergirds the words we heard this morning from Isaiah, and embodied in the words, deeds and promises of Jesus.

Dr Aviezer Ravitzky, professor of Jewish Philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has written a comprehensive article on Shalom, and his words lead us into this topic:

"The Hebrew word for peace, shalom (שלום) is derived from a root denoting wholeness or completeness.... Its significance is thus not limited...to the absence of war and enmity...or to the absence of quarrel and strife. It can refer...to bounteous physical conditions, to a moral value, and, ultimately, to a cosmic principle and divine attribute.

"In the Bible, the word shalom is most commonly used to refer to a state of...well-being, tranquility, prosperity, and security, circumstances unblemished by any sort of defect. Shalom is a blessing, a manifestation of divine grace.

"Of course, shalom also denotes the opposite of war... for the absence of war, too, suggests an orderly, prosperous, and tranquil state of affairs. In several scriptural passages the word peace refers to a value, and is used in the sense of equity, or loyalty."

This morning, I'd like to pick up on some of those powerful words that Dr. Ravitzky's has listed, which together can expand our understanding of SHALOM; for God's concept of peace is much more far-reaching than ours.

#### WHOLENESS

Other than the word "peace", the word I have most commonly heard associated with Shalom is "wholeness." To be whole, is to be re-integrated, within oneself and within one's community. To be whole is to be restored to health and balance, a state of being that our healing pathway practitioners embrace for all recipients of their healing care. To be whole is to be part of a community where reconciliation is a lived value. To be whole, is to come back to the life God intends – in a way, to be whole is to be reunified with the holy.

Perhaps what I like most about the word "wholeness", is that it's really hard to misunderstand it. The same word describes a well-rounded person, a harmonious community, and a world where the well-being of all people is accounted for. It is healthy, it is wholesome, it is full.

#### ORDERLINESS- TRANQUILITY - SECURITY

After a couple of extraordinarily busy, chaotic weeks, "orderly" and "tranquil" sound good. So does the "comfort" that Isaiah spoke of. I'm reasonably adaptable, but I do prefer it when things are calm, predictable, as expected. Of course, "orderly" is not something I regularly encounter, as my day often starts with looking for keys, comb and wallet, but if I take the time to breathe deeply and engage in spiritual practices like meditation or prayer or mindfulness, it can often feel like I am touching the edge of Shalom.

As I consider how much I benefit from order and tranquility, my thoughts move outward to those whose existence is seldom calm or orderly, people who rarely feel safe or secure. Think of someone who is homeless, as they are shifted from place to place in the cold of winter. Think of someone whose life is kept chaotic by the violence of a parent or partner. Think of someone who, by nature of the sound of their accent or the colour of their skin is constantly prepared to be attacked or evicted. Think of someone whose days are governed by the cruel, cunning master named addiction – either their own, or someone else's. I know how much I value feeling safe and secure, I know how much I benefit from tranquility and orderliness, and God's promise of Shalom pushes me to envision a world where this solid footing is available to all people.

#### PROSPERITY (with EQUITY)

I remember being taken aback the first time I heard that "prosperity" is included in the Biblical notion of Shalom. It seemed to me that prosperity was kind of the opposite of Shalom, usually defined by having "more than" a whole bunch of other people, and keeping prosperity safely guarded from one's neighbour has divided neighbours and set nations to war.

But "prosperous", prosperity FOR ALL, is a quality of God's promised peace. This is the message of Isaiah 40, a vision of hills and valleys and treacherous turns being smoothed out for all travelers, of an entire people in distress being comforted at once by their shepherd God. The prosperity that resides within Shalom knows nothing of one-upmanship, but is equitable, truly coming alive on that day when we know that all God's children have been well looked after.

With this understanding of prosperity, the scent of an orange that I have just peeled would be that much sweeter, knowing that nobody is going to bed hungry. Snuggling up with a warm blanket would bring that much more comfort, knowing that nobody will freeze to death this night. Cozying up with a good book would be an even greater gift, knowing that every girl and boy had the opportunity to learn how to read. Enjoying everything that is beautiful and healthy about mountain living would be even better, if we could live in a community where everyone is adequately housed and adequately paid. The prosperity connected to Shalom moves us away from individual rewards, to a realm where all lives are defined by plenty rather than want.

#### FREEDOM FROM WAR

One of the most common ways to understand peace, is peace as opposite of war. And while this may seem blatantly obvious, it is not to be trifled with, as anyone who has lived in a war zone can tell you. Three years ago, when we were first considering refugee sponsorship, I remember a conversation that Roger M-P related to me. Roger had been dealing with someone who arrived in Canada as a refugee from an African nation embroiled in civil war, and he asked this person what the biggest difference was between the situation they had left and the place they now lived. "Oh, that's easy" was the reply. "Now I can go to sleep at night without fearing that someone is going to slit my throat." My apologies for how graphic that image is, but it brings home the level of daily violence that still holds such sway in the world. Sometimes in the name of power or the need to dominate, sometimes in the name of ignorance or fear, sometimes in the name of a broken understanding of god, violence and armed conflict find ways to be asserted on a daily basis.

The Institute for Economics and Peace produces an annual "Global Peace Index" which measures the relative peacefulness of 163 nations. In their 2018 report, only eleven nations – including, thankfully, Canada – are rated as having a "very high" level of peace; 71 nations were adjudged to be more peaceful this year than last, while 92 saw their state of peacefulness deteriorate. That same organization promotes what they call the "Eight Pillars of Peace" and while I may quibble with the way some of these are stated, they illustrate the kinds of groundwork needed to work towards God's goal of a world without war: the eight pillars are,

- Well-functioning government

- Sound business environment
- Acceptance of the rights of others
- Good relations with neighbours
- Free flow of information
- High levels of human capital – resting, to a large part, on education
- Low levels of corruption
- Equitable distribution of resources

(if you're interested in reading more, you'll find the link in this sermon online, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/06/Global-Peace-Index-2018-2.pdf> and also on the RCMUC Facebook page).

Some of these eight pillars, we can directly impact, while others remain several steps removed from us, but what's important to note as followers of Jesus is that the path to peace is not just about bullets not being fired; the soil of peace is tilled when love of neighbour is expressed through resources being distributed equitably, truthful information flowing freely, human rights defended staunchly. For those of us who think of peace being synonymous with calmness and serenity, this point reminds us that striving for peace, in my life and in the life of the world, is not a passive process.

#### GRACE

The aspect of Dr. Ravitsky's definition of Shalom that I'd like to leave us with, is this: Shalom is "a manifestation of divine grace."

For me, understanding Shalom as a gift of God ties so much together:

- it ties together the Jewish roots of our faith tradition, with our understanding of a young Jewish man named Jesus, whom we know as the Prince of Peace: one who was nothing less than a manifestation of the grace of God;
- it ties together the human work of living peaceably with one another, with God's holy intention for peace;
- it ties together the new way that Jesus speaks of, a realm or Kingdom or kin-dom where all shall live in peace and none shall be afraid, with the actions of the gracious God who brought hope to Isaiah, and who is unfolding such a realm in our midst even now.

As followers of the loving path of Jesus, understanding Shalom as God's work, which we are encouraged to join, gives us a hope and a resilience beyond our own in the quest for this full form of peace. The love at the heart of God calls us back to our best selves, and gives us eyes to see the hidden faces of poverty and distress in our neighbourhood and our world. With Shalom in our midst, with Shalom illuminating our path, with Shalom beckoning to the world as a promise that will be realized, we gather and work and pray that Shalom, peace and wholeness in all its fullness, will live in the very heart of humanity. In hope and anticipation we pray, Amen.

#### References cited:

Institute of Economics and Peace. (1) Research page, <http://economicsandpeace.org/research/#positive-peace> and (2) "Global Peace Index 2018" <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/06/Global-Peace-Index-2018-2.pdf>

Ravitzky, Aviezer. "Shalom: Peace in Hebrew". *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, Twayne Publishers.- accessed at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shalom/>

See also... Zaslów, Rabbi David. <https://rabbidavidzaslow.com/the-deeper-meaning-of-shalom/>