

Pastor's Message – 12/10/2023  
Isaiah 9:1-7 Colossians 1:13-20

Last week, we heard in the story of Zechariah how the light of grace shines hope, how even though he and his wife, Elizabeth, were long past the possibility of a son, God still offered a promise of hope over the darkness of despair. This week, we pick up where we left off with a part of Zechariah's promising song: "to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Peace is that which overcomes all animosity and hostility between people. Peace brings people back into relationship with God and with one another.

But peace, real peace, is always an act of God's grace. Today, on this second Sunday of Advent, we turn to the story of the prophet Isaiah to see how this light of peace shines upon us.

You may remember from the biblical Book of Isaiah, where in chapter 6, Isaiah was called to be a prophet of the Lord. Yet the first words that Isaiah speaks in the moment of his calling are not words of peace and comfort and joy, but words of self-incriminating "woe" as he stands before the throne of God.

*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Isaiah 6:5).*

Isaiah knows that he is a sinner and deserves the just judgment. Here in this moment as he stands in the very presence of God, Isaiah knows the sharp contrast between God's holiness and his own sinful being. He knows that he is lost and unworthy of God's call. He, like Zechariah, is struck speechless.

Moreover, Isaiah knows that he lives among people who are also sinners like him, and that all are lost and fall short of the glory of God. In our sinfulness, we must also remain silent.

Yet the light of grace shines upon Isaiah. An angel of the Lord touches his mouth with a burning coal from the altar of God—a symbol of cleansing and healing—and says to him, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out" (Isaiah 6:7, NRSVUE).

Only when our guilt is covered in the mercy of God and our sins are blotted out may we speak freely. Only then do we have the grace of God.

It was God's act of grace that saved Isaiah from his sinfulness, just as God's grace saves us. Isaiah would never forget how he was set free by this divine light of grace. Even Isaiah's own name means "The Lord is salvation."

*Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid.  
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.*

Isaiah's message for the people would point them to that day of salvation—that day when all may rejoice in God's favor and freeing grace.

*Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.  
And on that day you shall say, give thanks to the LORD and call upon his name.  
Make his deeds known among the nations; see that they remember that his name is exalted.  
Sing the praises of the LORD, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world.*

This light of grace is a light of peace that restores us to relationship with God. This light shines upon Isaiah and enables him to take up his calling as a prophet of the Lord. So, when the Lord calls out, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah humbly, but boldly, replies in his newfound relationship of peace, *Here am I; send me! (Isaiah 6:8).*

There were, unfortunately, false prophets who proclaimed a different message of peace. Their message sought to soothe the people and placate their kings in the face of impending terrors of invading nations. But their message was not based on God's word. Their peace overlooked the darkness of their sins. All the people had turned away from God and forsaken God's ways. The people and their rulers had denied justice and compassion for the least among them—the poor, the widows, and the orphans. The prophet Jeremiah spoke harsh words for these false messengers of peace: "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). And Isaiah also brought forth harsh words to say about such false messages of comfort.

*In pride and arrogance of heart they said: "The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their places" (Isaiah 9:9-10).*

Make no mistake, God would speak words of compassionate peace. In my preparations for today, I almost deleted the first verse of Isaiah 9 today, "Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted." And truly, we need God's word of peace to have real peace. In spite of our efforts, the world still needs God's gift of peace. Because of human selfishness and self-centeredness, humanity turns away from God's gift of peace time after time. We turn in upon ourselves, and trust in our own limited abilities, and bask in all our accomplishments.

When Isaiah answers the call, he finds that the first word of the Lord for the people is not one of peace, but one of judgment. God would have him expose the people to the truth of their own sinfulness. But even with this word of judgment, due to their hardness of heart, they would not hear. Isaiah recalls God's charge:

He said, "Go and tell this people:  
 "Listen hard, but you aren't going to get it;  
 look hard, but you won't catch on.'  
 Make these people blockheads,  
 with fingers in their ears and blindfolds on their eyes,  
 So they won't see a thing, won't hear a word,  
 So they won't have a clue about what's going on  
 and, yes, so they won't turn around and be made whole."  
*(Isaiah 6:9-10 – The Message).*

God knew that the hearts of the people were hardened. They lived in their own false sense of righteousness that all is well. Their ears were deaf to the truth of their own sinfulness. Their eyes were blind to the word of the Lord. And for all of that, they would be cut down like a mighty tree that is felled.

Nor are the prophets themselves exempted from judgment. All the prophets, including Isaiah, lived in the land of "unclean lips," and were likewise under this judgment (Isaiah 6:5). They did not stand above others in arrogance, but they recognized that the judgments of God were for all the people, including themselves.

Likewise, we should hear the prophetic judgment as a judgment that speaks also to us. For we are also a people of "unclean lips," with ears and hearts dulled to the word of God. While we see the signs of violence and live in fear and foreboding, many do not turn to God. Too many put their trust in the false prophets of our own time that speak "'peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:4). Our hearts are hardened and sold to this false message. We do not hear with our ears or see with our eyes the truth of our sinfulness and all that it has wrought. Who is to say that our own prideful tree of false righteousness will not be chopped down?

Yet there is healing in the midst of God's judgment. The last word of the Lord to Isaiah may provide the best clue for a word of healing and a word of grace.

Have you ever seen a tree cut down with the stump remaining. Before too long, shoots begin to grow from that stump. God reminds his people of that truth and hope through Isaiah in chapter 6,

“But as a terebinth or oak tree leaves a stump when it is cut down,  
so Israel’s stump will be a holy seed.” (*Isaiah 6:13*).

Who is this holy seed? It is Jesus, our Lord! Jesus knew that people with blinded eyes and hardened hearts would not hear the Word of God. He knew the truth of our sinfulness. But the authority of his Word is unlike the word of judgment. His Word is a word of peace—real peace—peace with God; and through him, peace is our message with one another. Jesus does not dismiss the word of judgment—a word that sees through us all. But he is the “holy seed” of promise that will see us through to healing and wholeness. Jesus Christ will take the word of judgment upon himself and give us instead his light of peace. For all of us who are judged in sins, he proclaims healing. It is only through Jesus’ light of peace and promise that we may trust these powerful words of healing and grace:

*“Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord, and I will heal them” (Isaiah 57:19).*

We have this peace with God through Christ (Romans 5:1). We are found in our lostness, healed of our woundedness, and given sight beyond all the blindness of our sin through faith—faith that trusts that Jesus is the Messiah God sends for us. From the felled tree of our sin and death, there grows a new branch, a righteous branch. Indeed, Jesus Christ is that branch, just as he takes our sin and death with him to the cross—the tree of judgment for our sin and death—so that we might all be set free. Jesus Christ is that branch that blossoms even from his stump of death on the cross in order to grace us and to heal us from all our sins.

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots (Isaiah 11:1).*

One of our most treasured hymns of this season even sings Isaiah’s words (UMH #216):

Lo, how a rose e’er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!  
Of Jesse’s lineage coming as prophets long have sung.  
It came, a flow’ret bright, amid the cold of winter,  
When half-spent was the night.

Isaiah ’twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind;  
With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.  
To show God’s love aright, she bore to us a Savior,  
When half-spent was the night.

Isaiah foretold of this tender sprouting flower, this rose of God sent to us in the midst of our darkest winter: *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).*

*Emmanuel, Emmanuel, his name is called Emmanuel.*

*God with us, revealed in us, his name is called Emmanuel. (UMG #204)*

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7).*

As Isaiah knew, grace is not cheap. There is a cost. Healing peace for our sake comes when our Lord Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8, NRSVUE). He bore our judgment unto death so that we might be set free from that judgment. But through his

death and glorious resurrection we come to this fullness of God's light of peace that shines for us all. Death and judgment are not the last word. Mercy and peace are the last Word.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

In Christ's light of grace and peace, we not only have peace with God. We get to be bearers of that light of peace for all the world. And we bear it so that all who are still living in the darkness of sin and judgment may come to God's healing grace and peace in Christ. We get to point to Christ's future. But even now through faith, God's plan in Christ unfolds for us new growth that blossoms and grows. Our fear and foreboding will give way to peace for one and for all, and the peaceable kingdom of God's reign will dawn upon all of humanity and creation.

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*

Christ spells the end of a world trapped in violence and death. He did not invoke violence upon others but accepted the violence of death upon the cross for us all. And even there on the cross he forgave his enemies. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). We also point to that day when violence will cease, as Isaiah pointed in hope for the unfolding promise:

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:4).*

There can be no argument that the world we live in is tragically violent. The evidence is all around us, and sometimes even in our own families and personal lives. There are the bitter conflicts of war, the critical divisions between peoples, the blindness of prejudice, power and greed that lead us to deny the poorest among us and all who are oppressed. Yet as we live in this world of sin, we do not live in fear and foreboding but with the sure and certain promise of a new message—the message of Christ's peace!

Like Isaiah, we, too, have a calling. We are called to be ministers of reconciliation. We share the promising message of peace, even when others may not be peaceful with us and may even lead us to suffer for sharing it. Nevertheless, trusting in Christ, we venture forward in Christ's promise, Christ's Word of grace. We share the light of Christ's peace with the world.

The crucified Jesus, bearing the marks of his death, came to his frightened and troubled disciples who were gathered in a dark and locked room on Easter evening. There he spoke these words: "Peace be with you." Indeed, Jesus' light of peace shines in the darkness, and unbars the door for us. Our relationship with God is made whole. Now we may seek to unbar the doors in this peace and set others free from darkness.

Christ was sent for us that we have his grace and good news of peace. And his grace and peace are for one and all! Like all the faithful saints who have gone before us, we live in the promise of God's saving grace and peace. And in all humility, we boldly proclaim that good news for all whom we encounter. Like Isaiah, we take up the mantle of our grace-filled calling.

*Here I am, Lord, is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.*

*I will go, Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.*

May the light of peace for which we give thanks today, shine for all the world!