

THE PATH OF PEACE
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December 7, 2014
Second Sunday of Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 40:1-11

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.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

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This is the second Sunday of Advent. The candles of hope and peace burn before us. Hope and peace are on my mind this morning and so is love.

On Monday, I officiated the marriage celebration of Kathey and Samenda, partners for five years and now legally married. And yesterday the marriage celebration of Rob and Richard, partners for nearly 35 years and now legally married.

Love and peace are on my mind this morning.

And so is war.

Seventy-three years ago today, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese air force attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing 2,400 Americans and wounding more than a thousand.

Four years later in August 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killing 129,000 people and maiming countless others. That, by the way, has been the only use of nuclear weapons for warfare.

War is on my mind this morning.

And so is violence of a lesser degree.

Two years ago next Sunday, December 14, 2012, a crazed gunman killed 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Our nation rose up in outrage, crying out for change. But the cries subsided and senseless killings continued.

And now two black men and a little boy are dead, victims of a frightened, polarized and heavily armed society. Our nation has risen up again crying out for change. But the path to peace is not smooth, short or easy.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is over.

These are the words of the prophet Isaiah proclaimed 600 years before the birth of Jesus and, oh, how we need them today more than ever, not just in Jerusalem, but in Damascus and Baghdad and Kabul and Khartoum and Washington and Ferguson.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is over. A voice cries out: 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.

What ever else Advent may be, it is a season of longing, a burning and aching for peace. The path of peace is not smooth or short or easy, in part, because peace without justice is no peace at all. The path to peace is not smooth or straight. Many obstacles stand in the way, stand in the way like mountains, valleys, crooked ways, uneven ground and rough places.

Prepare the way for the Prince of Peace. But expect hard work.

Fifty years ago this week, December 10, 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with these words.

I accept the Nobel Prize for Peace at a moment when 22 million Negroes in the United States are engaged in a creative battle to end the long night of racial injustice. I accept this award on behalf of a civil rights movement, moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice. I am mindful that debilitating and grinding poverty afflicts my people and chains them to the lowest rung of the economic ladder.

I must ask why this prize is awarded to a movement, beleaguered and committed to unrelenting struggle; to a movement, which has not won the very peace, which is the essence of the Nobel Prize.

I must conclude that this award is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time—the need for humankind to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression. Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts.

The path to peace is not smooth or easy, not among the nations, or in our own hearts. But we mustn't give up.

I've been reading *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand. *Unbroken* is the story of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic track star who survived a plane crash in the Pacific theater, spent 47 days drifting on a raft, living on rainwater and an occasional bird or fish. He drifted into Japanese waters and was taken prisoner and then survived two and a half years of brutal treatment before being released after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Unbroken is a story of survival through one dark night after another, through one storm after another, hoping against hope that morning would dawn one more time. This is a story not just about a war hero. This is a testimonial to the resilience of the human spirit up against dire odds and insurmountable obstacles, you know, like making the world, including your own world, more peaceful, more just, less greedy, less violent. As the story of Zamperini reveals, the human spirit is resilient. It doesn't give up easily.

That path of peace is not easy, short or smooth. So we mustn't give up—as Martin Luther King proclaimed in his acceptance speech 50 years ago, like a voice crying in the wilderness.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of humanity. I still believe that one day humankind will bow before the altar of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive

good will be proclaimed the rule of the land.

“And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every one shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.” I still believe that we shall overcome!

What ever else Advent may be, it is a season of longing for peace and justice among nations, within nations, within police departments, within criminal justice systems, within our homes and within our hearts. The path of peace is not smooth. We may never reach the end of that path ourselves but let us never tire of preparing the way.