

“PEACE”

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Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11, Ps 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8

Today’s scriptures aren’t of the kind that get us ready for a baby in the manger. No - these are for that other emphasis of Advent, the Second Coming of Christ, also known as the *Parousia*. And although there are words of comfort buried in it, 2 Peter is not often read, in part because of it’s stiff formal tone . . . and its image of the world ending in fire. We’d really rather listen to Isaiah, as read by Marlene, wouldn’t we?

If you have your Bibles handy, turn to the Isaiah passage, because I’d like to clarify something for you. It’s something that puzzled me – something that doesn’t come first to mind when I hear this passage read, or sung in a performance of *Messiah*, or when I sing the hymn based on it. Isaiah 40 is the beginning of what is known as “Second Isaiah”, a portion of this very large book that was probably written by a different author from most of the first 39 chapters. Those chapters dealt with the Babylonian exile and sin from what might be termed a tit-for-tat basis. Then chapter 40 comes along, and the tone changes dramatically. “Comfort, comfort you my people!” says the Lord to the prophet. The theme turns toward reconciliation.

You’ll notice that our passage comprises the better part of 4 sections of verses. After all the comforting words, the third section – all that stuff after “A voice says ‘Cry out!’” – is pretty negative, and I just didn’t get it. Well, that’s the voice of our very human prophet, who’s been through the wringer. And this prophet takes a little convincing. The Lord promises a second exodus – a return to Jerusalem, but all that the prophet can see is the inconstancy of the people, which has led them into the Babylonian captivity as punishment for their sins. And then in the last section of this reading, “Lift up your voice, do not fear. The Lord will lead his flock like a shepherd.”

So that passage is 100% comfort God will take care of you. Just like the Exodus from Egypt, there will be another Exodus from Babylon.

Then there’s the Psalm appointed for today. You may not have caught all the words, but it’s a recitation of God’s mighty acts of compassion – restoring the fortunes of Jacob, forgiving and pardoning. And then it shifts to the future – the Lord will speak peace to the people, to those who turn to him in their hearts, their salvation is at hand. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss. The Lord will give what is good, and righteousness will make a path for his steps. Again - all upbeat!

Then I snuck the gospel lesson from Mark into the Call to Confession, about John the Baptist calling the people to do what the Psalm says - turn their hearts, turn their lives around – the very thing we mean when we say “repent.” It was also there in the Psalm. Repent doesn’t mean saying “I’m sorry”, even when it’s sincere and you follow up by making amends. Repent means turning around, making the effort to change your heart, change your life, change your priorities, change your ways.

And that brings us back to 2 Peter. And he lays it on the line throughout his entire letter. The key verse here is verse 9. In the NRSV it reads, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” That’s very clear, and it was directed at a people who were vulnerable to false prophets, because they had believed Jesus would return in their lifetime . . . and he hadn’t. So they fell prey to those who scoffed at their God and their stories. But Peter says, “no, God isn’t late . . . God wants to give everyone the best possible chance to come around.”

In the CEB, the new Common English Bible, the words sound more like the Psalm: “

”The Lord isn’t slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.”

Steve Carcaterra, of Engle, Colorado, is someone whose heart and life have changed, and who seeks to elicit change in the hearts of others. He reports that for the last couple of years, the small town of Glenwood Springs, Colorado, has held a re-enactment of the gunfight at the OK Corral, which actually occurred in Tombstone, Arizona. Actors portraying the Earp Brothers and Doc Holliday ride into town on horseback and square off against actors portraying the Clantons and proceed to blow each other away in front of bleachers full of cheering people, many of whom are children.

Carcaterra never considered himself an activist but, considering how many people are killed by guns in our country each year, he had to question the appropriateness of making this historic violence into a spectator sport. So he staged a one-man peace witness with a folding chair and some homemade posters saying things like, "Real guns kill Real people," and "14,000 Americans died as a result of handgun violence." His peace witness did not go unnoticed. It triggered a barrage of letters to the editor in the local paper both pro and con. One of the city’s merchants came to his defense when another merchant was ruthless in his criticism of Carcaterra’s peace position and personhood in general.

Carcaterra says that his intent was to make people think about the appropriateness of this event and especially the promotion of it as a form of entertainment. And it was successful. Next year he plans to ask the organizers of the event to cease promoting a violent, murderous act as a form of entertainment. If they insist on holding the event, he says he will return, hopefully with even more people.¹

How will you prepare your heart for the coming of the Christ, the Prince of Peace?

ENDNOTES

1. “Peace Witness at the OK Corral” was taken from the web site of the Peace and Justice Support Network of the Mennonite Church U.S.A. (<http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/stories.html>)