

TRAIL MARKERS OF ADVENT

2) Peace

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As we travel the winding Advent trail that leads to Bethlehem's stable, we are relying upon the trail markers of hope, peace, joy and love to point the way. Last week, we began our journey at the "trail head of hope" as I suggested that true hope is not to be found in merely wishing for what we want, but in anticipating what God will yet do. But there is more involved than our anticipation. True hope is fulfilled through our participation in the work of God's Spirit. We are, after all, the hands and feet of God's love at work in our world.

This morning, we consider the second trail marker of Advent—the trail marker of peace.

Like hope, peace is a word that holds many different meanings. And there are, likewise, many different dimensions of peace. There is inner peace and outer peace, not to mention peace of mind and peace of presence. I recently came across a little check list that enables one to evaluate their level of peace.

If you can start the day without caffeine.

If you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains.

If you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles.

If you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it.

If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time.

If you can take criticism and blame without resentment.

If you can conquer tension without medical help.

If you can relax without a glass of wine.

If you can sleep without the aid of drugs.

Then you are probably... the family dog! (Photo of Meditating Dog)

The Psalms are serving as our guide book on this Advent journey and it is Psalm 85 that provides the context for our reflection upon the importance of peace. This Psalm was likely written after the people of Israel had returned from their exile in Babylon. The first three verses speak of the ways in which God has forgiven and restored God's people. In the fourth verses however, we find the familiar plea from last week's reading: **"Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us."**

Apparently, the return from captivity in Babylon had not provided the answer to all of Israel's problems. There is still a longing for something more...more than merely a return home to the land that they love. There is a longing for a peace that is both internal and external. In the eighth verse, the Psalmist gives voice to this longing: **"Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts."**

The longing is for God's word of peace...for the day when (v. 10) when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;" the day when **"righteousness and peace will kiss each other."** What a beautiful vision! What a marvelous glimpse of life as the Psalmist longs for it to be. What a marvelous glimpse of life as we all long for it to be!

Who among us does not long for inner peace in the midst of the stress and conflict that marks are day to day existence? Who among us does not desire that inner calm that allows us to make difficult decisions with clarity and wisdom?

And who among us does not long an outer peace, a peace for our world in which "nation shall not lift up sword against nation and neither shall they study war anymore?" Who does not long for an end to the insanity that is war?

The words of the Psalmist are indeed, our own... **O God, restore us again...speak the word of peace to us. Let righteousness and peace kiss each other.** This is the eternal human longing for peace.

But if this longing is to become more than mere longing, if it is to become more than wishful thinking, if it is to become more than idle dreaming, it must put down its roots in the rocky soil of reality. Our plea must become our practice. Our vision must become our decision to be people of peace.

This trail marker of peace, after all, leads us to the birthplace of the one known to the world as the "Prince of Peace," the one who boldly practiced peace...the one who blessed the peace makers—calling them children of God. Notice that did not bless the peace **wishers**—those who loved the thought of peace and were sure to include those thoughts in their Christmas cards each year. No, he blessed and celebrated the peace **makers**—those who boldly exercised their calling as children of God by actually practicing peace.

The season of Advent provides us with a wonderful opportunity to practice the peace that we so often preach. It is a season that invites us to practice the peace that is found when we make room in our busy lives for the presence of God and the priorities that grow out of that presence.

What would our lives look like if we chose to do just that? Someone sent me another check list that might prove insightful. The practice of peace will lead to:

- An increasing desire to enjoy daily moments*
- A diminishing interest in judging self or others*
- Episodes of appreciation and gratitude*
- Outbursts of laughter and happiness*
- A diminishing capacity to worry*
- Spontaneous actions of caring*
- Feelings of contentment and connection with others and nature*

- A loss of interest in control and "forcing things to happen"*
- A tendency to trust life and God*
- A susceptibility to love and a willingness to express it.*

If you are serious about practicing peace, these descriptions provide a good place to start.

Our practice of peace, however, involves more than merely the personal dimension of our lives. Our practice of peace has social implications—indeed, global implications. To know the peace of God personally is to act upon the peace of God socially. It is to join with the prophets of old who insisted living according to the vision of world where swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning knives.

It was Thomas Merton, the great mystic of the 20th century who wrote, "Peace is not something you must hope for in the future. Rather, it is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present, you will never find it."

Peace begins here and now. It begins with a deepening of this present moment and our willingness to become peace makers—the children of God that not only experience peace personally, but express peace socially—globally

Yes, there is a considerable risk in doing so in a world consumed by its fear. And yet, it seems to me, there is a greater risk in giving in to the forces of fear. For we can see where these forces are leading us and it is not in the direction of healing and wholeness, but in the direction of our own self-destruction. There is a risk in choosing to make peace, but a far greater risk in refusing to do so—in allowing the forces of fear to dictate our course.

There has to be a better way. And indeed there is. So it is that we join with the Psalmist this morning in offering our timeless plea: **"Restore us again, O God of our salvation! Speak peace to your people."**

But let's not stop there. Instead, let's translate our plea into practice...let's allow the beautiful vision of peace to inspire our decision to be people of peace...people who not only hear the word of peace...not only speak the word of peace...but people who live the word of peace.

Some of us remember the old summer camp song that we used to sing around the fire...Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now. With every step I take, may this be my solemn vow: To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Let us stand and sing this song together as our fervent prayer. Amen!

