

*'Expect peace, but don't think you've got it made.'* Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, December 7 2008

There are many occasions when Jesus was sad. So the gospel writers attest. But they tell us just two when he wept? When was it that Jesus was moved to tears? Probably we think of the occasion recorded by St John when on the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. The other, as recorded by St Luke, is when he wept over the city of Jerusalem. It was near the end of his life, after his ministry in Galilee. To this day, there is a beautiful little church, built in the shape of a teardrop, to commemorate this. It is called 'Dominus flevit', 'the Lord wept. The church is on the hillside near the Mount of Olives with a window affording a great view of the city of Jerusalem. I have visited that church several times and each time it was not difficult to enter into Jesus' deep sadness as he looked over this city. Although its name means city of peace, it was in Jesus' day a city of conflict. On each occasion I have been to Jerusalem it has still been a city of conflict. Luke tells us that as Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he said, 'If you ... had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!' (19:42)

What would Jesus weep over today? Sadly not only over Jerusalem, but over many places of conflict today. There are, at the latest count, 300 wars going on today, yes, 300. And there are many other places where there is not open warfare but there is violent conflict. Think only of the news bulletins in the past week or so. In particular, conflict has been experienced by in India with many people killed in terrorist attacks in Mumbai. But when we hear of such places they seem so remote from ourselves, don't they? Perhaps Iraq feels a little closer to home, now that Bob Marble is ministering to the American forces there and also because all of us knows someone serving there or in Afghanistan. But, you know, when, in the Beatitudes, Jesus blessed the peacemakers, he wasn't addressing just those involved in military conflict, but all those capable of conflict – with the foe of family, of alienated friend, of someone with radically different views, with any number of people. Who is it needs to recognize the things that make for peace and then make peace? It is surely everyman. It's strange, isn't it how we continually wonder why warring tribes and peoples cannot get on with one another and live together peaceably and yet each of us can be so easily stirred up by even a minor conflict with someone else. Make peace? You mean that I have to make the first move? Blessed are the peacemakers. You mean Jesus said that I have to be prepared to back down? Even when I am so right!

The other day I read in a newspaper a blunt headline that deeply shocked me. It simply said: 'Hutus and Tutsis can never live together.' It is now the end of 2008. What shocked me was the deep pessimism of this statement. Let me read you for a minute a brief history of these peoples so that we can think about it in the light of today's theme of 'expecting peace'. ... How terrible, we say, that these people can't make peace and get on with their lives. And yet, in our community, I sometimes hear the same. Such a group will never be able to co-exist with such a group. So and so will never be reconciled to so and so. Even in our own families, we may have a rift that we just can't believe will ever be healed. Even Christians of different denominations often seem bitterly divided. From the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem came some almost unbelievable

scenes the other week of two groups of monks coming to blows in the sanctuary. Each group blamed the other, of course, but imagine the impact of this debacle on those visiting this place, built on the ground where Jesus was buried and then raised. How the 'Prince of peace' would weep over the behavior of these present-day followers of his in Jerusalem!

You know why Jews don't believe that Jesus was the Messiah? Because he didn't establish the peaceful reign that the prophet Isaiah, for one, speaks about in a number of passages. Two of these passages we shall hear read next Sunday in our festival of lessons and carols. Now Jews are right, with the arrival of Jesus, the Messianic Age of peaceful living did not begin. In one way, we Christians accept this. God's purposes are not yet fulfilled. We believe in a second coming of Christ and this is the focus of our Advent. We have to learn to expect peace and not get cynical. There is a humorous Jewish phrase about expecting the Messiah. A Jew says to another Jew: 'I don't believe any longer that the Messiah will come; he doesn't even call.' We Christians can easily slip into the same lack of expectancy. We don't expect peace. But remember that it is a Christian belief that though God's kingdom, God's rule on earth has yet to come, it has already come wherever one person follows God's rule. So Mark begins his gospel with Jesus. Jesus is himself the good news for any who will recognize his ways as God's ways. And what is the role of John the Baptist's, the messenger we think about this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent? Put starkly it is to prepare people for this recognition. It is to alert people and get them to change from their all too human and misleading attempts at peace so that they recognize the rule of God when they see it. John the Baptist may not strike you as a real peaceful figure. But then it all depends what you understand by the word 'peace'. If by peace you mean smoothing over differences or burying your head in the sand when disagreements occur, then John is not the harbinger of peace. Let's think about what this morning's psalm teaches us about peace.

Like John, the psalmist articulates his vision of salvation very simply. He echoes the words of Isaiah: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."' (Isaiah 52: 7) So the psalmist is called to speak peace. He is called to announce the active presence of God. But note that this can only be to God's faithful people, to those who are ready to meet God. (Psalm 85:7-8) If we are to see God's glory, we must 'fear him', that is, be in awe of God. This presents a paradox that threads throughout the Bible: peace is God's gift, yet the people must also play their part in remaining faithful. Note too that God's presence is an active presence; salvation is a dynamic process, not a one-shot 'I've been-saved' experience. Steadfast love and faithfulness don't just coexist; they meet. Righteousness and peace aren't a static state; they kiss.' Isn't this a beautiful image that the psalmist offers verse 10: 'Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other'? It tells us so much about the true nature of peace, *shalom*. *Shalom* 'is well-being that exists in the very midst of threats – from sword and drought, and from wild animals. It is well-being of a material, physical, historical kind, not idyllic pie in the sky, but salvation in the midst of trees and crops and enemies – in the very places where people always have to cope with anxiety, struggle for survival, and deal with temptation. It is well-being of a very personal kind ... but it is also deliberately corporate. If there is to be well-being, it will

not be just for isolated, insulated individuals; it is rather security and prosperity granted to a whole community – young and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependent. Always we are all in it together.’<sup>1</sup>

The true peace-makers in the world have always been clear that this peace, not just the absence of conflict but the fullness of life, needs righteousness, (*tsedeq*). Righteousness is not the puffed-up morality the word has come to connote, but right relations, be they with God, with others, in our families, among nations, with our earth. ‘Sometimes we call this justice. But for that righteousness or justice to be more than legalistic fairness, it needs the breadth of vision found in God’s shalom. ... The psalmist’s proclamation means that we will know God’s salvation is near, not when there are war and conflict in the Middle East (or anywhere else), but when God’s peace – and love, faithfulness, and right relationships – prevail. Both Bethlehem’s manger and Calvary’s cross are signs of salvation for us. But so is the life lived in between, in all the ways Jesus made flesh those words of love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. Moreover, for Christians, salvation is not just believing in Jesus Christ, but embodying what he embodied in this world. When steadfast love and faithfulness meet in our lives, when righteousness and peace embrace in our business practices, our family relations, or our nation’s policies, God’s salvation is near at hand. When we work for justice, we make way for God in our world.’<sup>2</sup>

The helpful insert in your bulletin, which you might care to read later today, reminds us of Isaiah’s words: ‘The wolf shall live with the lamb’. In other word, don’t give up expecting peace where there is conflict in your life. What are your opposites? Who do you give up on saying: they can never be reconciled. In the land of Jesus where started our thinking this morning, you hear people say: Palestinians and Jews will never live peaceably together. But let me tell you a story from the Middle East. In 2006, there was a war between Israel, Lebanon, and Hezbollah. An Israeli, called Motti Tamam, had two brothers who were both killed by a Hezbollah rocket. Motti Tam asked that their eyes be available for transplant. One of the recipients was Nikolas Elias, an Arab man who was blind. The two men, one Israeli and the other Arab, later met, shook hands, and exchanged phone numbers. ‘Salvation is at hand’, says the Psalmist, when ‘steadfast love and faithfulness will meet’ righteousness and peace will kiss each other.’ May we in this season of Advent see such salvation through Mr Tamam’s vision and Mr Elias’s eyes. May we see the things that make for peace. May we both expect peace and work for peace. The other month we learned the prayer of St Francis which begins: ‘Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.’ To be such an instrument, we know that each of us has to receive God’s transforming presence in our lives. So, as we prepare for the confirmation of God’s presence in the bread and juice of Holy Communion, I share with you another powerful prayer, an Irish blessing:

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<sup>1</sup> W Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1982, p16.

<sup>2</sup> Talitha Arnold in *Feasting on the Word*, volume I edit by David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 36

*Deep peace of the running waves to you.  
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.  
Deep peace of the smiling stars to you.  
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.  
Deep peace of the watching shepherds to you.  
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you. Amen*