

A Place of Peace

Isaiah 26:1-4; Psalm 34:1-18; John 14:2-27

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Isaiah describes a people who are invited to enter a strong and secure city; a place of safety and a place of peace. The inhabitants of the city will be

- a righteous people,
- a people who remains faithful to God,
- a people that has placed its trust in the one true living God.

Isaiah records for us a hymn of praise that the people will sing as they enter the city of the Lord, Jerusalem. It is a song of praise to the God who

- has created them,
- provided for them in the wilderness,
- brought them into the Land of Promise,
- has sustained them through many generations.

It is a song of praise to God who will finally

- bring justice to those who deserve it and
- mercy to those who don't deserve it and
- there will be celebration and peace in the presence of God.

God's people will finally enter into a place of safety, security, and peace.

But Isaiah is a prophet, not a reporter. Isaiah foretells of the "not yet." Isaiah holds out the hope of God for the possible, not the already attained. So,

- who is this prophet, Isaiah, and
- to whom is he speaking and
- what are the circumstances of the "not yet?"

The preaching of Isaiah represents the theological high-water mark of the whole Old Testament. Everything that we know about Isaiah leads us to believe that he was a man who lived in the city of Jerusalem. It was in the Temple during worship that Isaiah experienced his call from God. It was in the Temple that Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up." It was there that he also saw himself unworthy to be used by God as God's prophet. But it was God who prepared Isaiah and called him and sent him out as God's messenger.

The style of Isaiah's writing leads us to understand that he was well educated; perhaps he was a part of the higher order of society. His contacts with the kings of Judah lead us to believe that perhaps he was well acquainted with, and accepted by, the nobility of the day. He was a man well chosen for the task that God set before him.

Isaiah's mission from God was one that no person would have found exciting to accept. He was told from the beginning that his message would not be well received. Isaiah's mission from God was to prophesy the message of God to a people who would not respond. In fact,

- they would harden their hearts,
- they would bow their backs, and
- the more they heard the message of God,
- the more arrogant they would become.

The words of praise as a nation marches into a holy city are words of prophecy of the "not yet." They describe what will happen when Judah's future captivity has ceased.

When the word of God is continually rejected, the capacity to hear and understand it dies away. Deliberate neglect of God's truth and habitual deafness to God's warnings leads to indifference to God's working in their lives. Isaiah's message was the way in which God would bring judgment upon a people who had turned their back on the covenant that they had made with God when they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the Law that God gave to Moses. It was intended to be a covenant that lived on from generation to generation. Their ancestors had stood there and said, "All that You (God) say, we will do." But they did not.

Isaiah could read the signs of the times. The nation of Assyria was becoming more powerful and was enlarging her borders. Egypt had raised a mighty army. The Babylonian empire would soon be in charge of Assyria. Judah forgot that God, Yahweh, was their defense against being overcome. And Judah was invaded by Assyria who set up a vassal king over the people and it was only a matter of time until the nation of Judah was carried into captivity in Babylon.

If you read 2 Kings, Chapters 23-25, you will find more details than I can share this morning, but let me give you some idea about how far these people, under the leadership of their kings and priests, had moved away from any worship of Yahweh.

In the midst of the line of kings who had turned their back on Yahweh was one good king, Josiah, who, as we would say in the vernacular, cleaned house. Idolatrous priests had actually carried into the Temple the necessary equipment for the worship Baal and Asherah. They had set up places of worship throughout Judah. There were rituals that were meant to worship the sun and the moon and all the hosts of heaven. There were male cult prostitutes who were a part of the worship. And those are just a few of the blasphemous acts of worship that existed.

No wonder God was angered! No wonder God asked the people,

"My people, what have I done to you, and how have I wearied you?"

Answer me.

I brought you up from the land of Egypt and ransomed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses and Aaron and Miriam.”

(Micah 6:3-4)

Oh, my people, what have I done to you that you would turn your back on Me?

They brought judgment upon themselves.

King Nebuchadnezzar and his army set themselves up outside of the wall of Jerusalem and starved out the people. Once Jerusalem surrendered, the Babylonians sacked and burned the city to the ground. They carried all of the bronze and gold and silver out of the Temple and then burned the Temple. The only people who were not marched off into captivity were those who were poor, those who tended the fields, and those who cared for the vineyards. There was no city left. There was no leadership in their interest. There was no wealth upon which to build.

The people of Judah would remain in Babylon in captivity for 70 years according to the Jewish calendar. Their captivity would end only when Persia conquered Babylon and the king of Persia gave permission for anyone who wished to return to Judah to do so.

Those who returned would return to a wasted city and a difficult land, but they would return as a people who were open to learning what it meant to be a righteous people. They would be willing to listen to the teaching of Ezra, a righteous priest. Nehemiah would lead in rebuilding the wall around the city of Jerusalem to protect the people who would come inside when there was a threat.

Eventually the city of Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the land inhabited. Ezra, the priest, discovered the Scrolls of the Law in the ruins of the Temple and brought them out, and read them to the people and taught a new generation how to follow Yahweh.

About 500 years would pass before God would send God's Son into the world to live among God's people. It was one more attempt to personalize the enduring love and concern and grace that God offered to all of God's creation. Jesus would help us to understand who God is and what God is like. Jesus would be the means of providing God's grace to all people, not just to those who had stood at the foot of Mount Sinai.

In the Scripture that was read today from the Gospel of John, we find Jesus giving some last thoughts to his disciples. These are also important words for us. Jesus said,

“These things I have spoken to you while I am with you.”

(“These things” refers to all of his teachings during those three years.)

“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom my Father will send in my name will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”(When I have returned to my Father, you may forget some things and need to be reminded. When you meet circumstances that we have not experienced together, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will coach you about what to do.)

“My peace I am leaving with you. It is not the kind of peace that the world gives to you. My peace will keep your heart from being troubled. My peace will keep you from being fearful.”
(My peace will fill your soul regardless of the circumstances in which you find yourself.)

We need that kind of peace and assurance within our lives. We live in a world that knows more about war, and anger, and rage than it does about peace. We live in a world that has no problem with being a cultural Christian rather than being a righteous person. We live in a world that practices situational ethical decisions. What is right for them is what is right. We elect and approve and follow leaders who have little or no regard for what it means to be righteous.

We live in a world where individuals who lust for personal power have forgotten that they are not the center of the universe. We live in a world where people are so distressed with life that suicide and drug overdose are common. Worship on one day a week is an inconvenience to our schedule.

Those who know our country’s situation best remind us that our greatest threat does not come from some other country, as was the case with Judah. No, our greatest threat is ourselves and our own behavior. We can destroy ourselves from within.

On this weekend when we celebrate our independence from the rule of a king in England, there is a danger that we will voluntarily become subservient to the chaos that seems to now rule in so many arenas. When we are honest about our need, God’s grace holds out to us the teaching, the encouragement, the watchcare of the Holy Spirit. As we celebrate this weekend, may we be held in the grip of God’s grace. Amen