

2020 12 06 – A Path of Peace

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

Mark 1:1-8 (The Inclusive Bible)

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:

“Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heaven’s all gracious King!”

The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing. (Voices United #44)

This Sunday we opened our worship service with the singing of a Christmas carol. As many of you know, normally I try to avoid singing carols during Advent. I believe that Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation and that the singing of carols at the beginning of December takes away from the wonder of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But this year is different. Even the folks at Broadview magazine have admitted that they “turned on the Christmas tunes early this year.” They explained, “The prospect of spending the holidays at home, away from family, friends and church communities, has boosted our interest in hopeful, joyful music about the birth of a very special baby.” <https://broadview.org/christmas-carol-bracket/>

This year I even bought a book about the Christmas carols that we sing each year. This book describes the origin of the carols: who wrote them and what inspired their words and music. It is called *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” is included in the book. Here’s how its story begins:

In 1849, a Unitarian minister from Wayland, Massachusetts, was writing a Christmas Eve message for his congregation. As Dr. Edmund Sears worked on his sermon, he was a troubled man. Though it would be another decade before a civil war tore the United States apart, the debate over slavery, compounded by the poverty he saw in his own community, had all but broken the man's spirit. He desperately searched for words to inspire his congregation, but he was having a problem lifting even his own spirit above the depressing scenes that surrounded him. (Collins, Ace. *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (p. 96). Zondervan. Kindle Edition)

When I read these words, I couldn't help but compare 1849 to the times that we are living in. Dr. Sears could have been laden with anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic and its financial impact on his community. He could have been thinking about the rise in domestic abuse and the number of people struggling with depression. He could have been troubled by the racism that exists in our society and the unrest that has led to violence in this country and the one south of our border. In the year 2020, his search for words of inspiration would have been be just as desperate.

Today's scripture readings also originated in difficult times. Psalm 85 is believed to have been written while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and the Gospel of Mark takes place centuries later when Imperial Rome had control over the people of Israel. In both cases, these people were struggling to survive, to earn a living, to feed their families, and they were yearning for justice and freedom.

Their leaders had reason to lament, and yet they all shared inspiring words of hope, words that described a coming time of peace and prosperity. In the Gospel of Mark we meet John the Baptizer, an oddly-dressed man possibly reminiscent of Elijah, or one of the other ancient prophets, who has appeared in the desert with good news for the people of Judea. He is telling them that a powerful man is coming, a man who will baptize them in the Holy Spirit, a man with a direct connection to God, and a man who will set them free.

The psalmist shares similar words of hope as he sings to YHWH:

Your salvation is near for those who you revere you
and your glory will dwell in our land.

Love and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.

This is a song of new life for an exiled nation, a song of inspiration, a song of liberation and peace.

And today, we also sang:

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old,
when with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold;
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendours fling,
and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.

So from where do these words of peace and hope come? Let's go back to that troubled minister in Wayland, Massachusetts:

As Sears struggled, he thumbed through his well-worn Bible. In the second chapter of Luke, the minister was touched by the eighth and ninth verses: “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” After considering the miraculous nature of that long-ago moment, Sears picked up his pen and jotted down a five-verse poem he called “It Came upon the Midnight Clear.” (Collins, Ace. *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (p. 97). Zondervan. Kindle Edition)

Dr. Sears, John the Baptizer, and the writer of Psalm 85, they were all inspired by the miraculous power of a God of love and mercy, a God of peace and freedom. They lived in troubling times and yet they believed in the transforming power of God’s grace.

And they all had something else in common. They all knew that the world would change only if their people were willing to take the first step. The psalmist prayed to God,

I will listen to what you have to say, YHWH—
a voice that speaks of peace,
peace for your people and your friends
so long as they don’t return to their folly.

The psalmist knew that the Israelites had, in the past, turned away from God and

had started worshipping idols like gold, land and power. In order for peace to come, the psalmist knew, they could not return to their errant ways.

Similarly, in Mark, John the Baptizer is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And as we know, repentance is about change: a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of being. John knew that the people of Judea needed to turn to God. They needed to connect with the Ground of their Being, with the Holy Mystery in order to be ready for Jesus’ coming.

And finally here’s what Dr. Sears wrote in the poem that he used to end his 1849 Christmas Eve sermon:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And warring humankind, hears not the love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, and cease your strife, to hear the angels sing.

In order for peace to arrive each one of us must “make ready the way of our God.” It is up to us to hush the noise, to cease our strife, to avoid our “folly.” It is up to us to find our own inner peace, to listen for that still small voice within us, to be still and know. It is only then that we will hear the love that the angels bring.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

“There is no path to peace.

Peace is the path.”