

**Advent 1: Peace in the Midst of Conflict – Rev. Janice Reynolds
Psalm 122 and Isaiah 2:1-5**

**November 27, 2016
First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael**

A Bridge Of Peace

'They shall sit each person under a vine and under a fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" (Micah, 4. 4)

My Palestinian sister,
Daughter of Abraham, like me,
Let us build a sturdy bridge
From your olive world to mine,
From my orange world to yours,
Above the boiling pain
Of acid rain prejudice -
And hold human hands high
Full of free stars
Of twinkling peace
My Palestinian sister, daughter of Abraham,
I do not want to be your oppressor
You do not want to be my oppressor,
Or your jailer
Or my jailer,
We do not want to make each other afraid
Under our vines
And under our fig trees
Blossoming on a silvered horizon
Above the bruising and the bleeding
Of poisoned gases and scuds.
So, my Palestinian sister,
Let us build a bridge of
Jasmine understanding
Where each shall sit with her baby
Under her vine and under her fig tree -
And none shall make them afraid
AND NONE SHALL MAKE THEM AFRAID.

--Ada Aharoni

Peace in the Midst of Conflict

It is customary during Advent, the four weeks that prepare us for Christmas, to focus on the themes of Peace, Love, Joy and Hope. The candles we light each week on the Advent wreath stand for Peace, Love, Joy and Hope. today we lit the candle of Peace.

Peace in the midst of conflict... It's been a long stretch since generations alive today have lived in a peaceful time. There is unrest abroad, unrest here in the States and unrest in our hearts. Maybe it's a good thing that we are coming into the holidays. This Thanksgiving, it felt like it was time to hunker down with friends and family, give thanks for what is good right in front of us.

And yet, Martin Luther King Jr, wrote, "It is all too easy to sleep through Advent; to drift from one party to another, from one meal to another. But, if we are honest, so much of our lives are lived in a dream-like drift as well." Advent calls us to attention, he writes. "It proclaims the darkness in our lives and the promise of light to found in the mysterious child in the manger. Advent is nothing if not a call to wake up."

But it's painful to wake up to the darkness and the violence in the world. It's painful to see the pain and worry in the eyes of other people. No wonder we want to drift from one party to another. It feels better to focus closer to home, to forget the world's ills for a while.

In these first Advent readings situated in the Hebrew scriptures, we focus on Jerusalem, the center of Temple life, the heart of the Holy Land. Our reading at the beginning of Isaiah 2 is associated with Zion, which is a name synonymous with Jerusalem. Zion is also sometimes used as the name for The Temple mount, and also for the cosmic sense of "God's reign in the world to come". God has chosen Zion as the center of God's reign where God will one day bring chaos to an end.

Zion stands for God's vision of Peace. Jerusalem, has been a place of pilgrimage and worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims since the biblical era. Its Old City has significant religious sites around the Temple Mount compound, including the Western Wall (sacred to Judaism), the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (a Christian pilgrimage site) and the Dome of the Rock (a 7th-century Islamic shrine with a gold dome).

And yet, despite Jerusalem's relative safety and peace coexistence, there remains the intractable conflict in Israel and Palestine over land. But even within US Jewish congregations, there is a lot of disagreement about the approaches that should be taken toward peace. There is no uniform thinking on this issue regarding a two-state solution or other brokered ideas.

Our denomination has a middle east study group, and out of this group has come recommendations to the General Assembly. At the general assembly in 2014, PCUSA voted narrowly to Approve an overture calling for divestment from Caterpillar Inc., Hewlett-Packard

and Motorola Solutions, companies some allege are engaged in “non-peaceful pursuits” in the region. A similar overture failed 333-331 at the 220th Assembly (2012).

Although divestment was its most debated item, the overture also affirms the PC(USA)’s commitment to interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and relationships in the region. Immediately after the vote, the Moderator reaffirmed that, saying, “In no way is this a reflection for our lack of love for our Jewish sisters and brothers.”

However, just the fact that a Christian church was voting on this nuanced issue, it was perceived by Jewish leaders nationwide as being a slight on the nation of Israel. These are the kind of insensitivities that can arise through misunderstanding one another’s greatest hopes and values. It’s human nature to become very sensitive when we don’t feel understood. Carol Hovis who was director of the Marin Interfaith Council convened a group of Jewish Rabbis and Presbyterian pastors for dialogue on this issue. To meet on a face to face basis, individual to individual to explore this further. To make peace on an individual basis. I’ve only been involved in this group for a short time, but it is a profound experience.

It has helped me to begin to answer the question for myself: how do we wage peace? How in the world do we attain a sense of Peace while in the midst of conflict?

Psalm 122 gives us this advice:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of our God,
I will seek your good.

The Psalm suggests that we might we wish our foes peace within themselves. That we might pray for peace within ourselves and for the sake of God, we seek the other’s good.

The Prophet Isaiah also weighs in.... he says to *uphold* God’s vision for Peace. From Zion, out of that mountain of justice, comes the Torah, which pronounces that God will bring justice among all nations and arbitrate among the people. Isaiah predicts that the nations will respond by abolishing war. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. War will disappear, and its weapons will be changed into objects of peaceful coexistence.

Isn’t this our vision that we hold in our hearts? Don’t let go of this vision! It is God’s vision!!!
We must not become resigned to war and violence. "O house of Jacob, come! Let us walk in God's light!"

- ▶ What does it mean to look at our life and our world in the light of God? What do we see?
- ▶ What can we do, so that the roads of different people come together?

First... we must keep the vision of peace before us! The vision of Jerusalem in the midst of the conflict – with faiths sharing sacred space. Let us embrace the ways of peace, the ways of shalom. Shalom is not a mere absence of war. Shalom is wholeness, unity, oneness.

We must personally practice peace... what does that look like?

Brian McLaren, a leader in our denomination, suggests that we hold out a peace branch to those who think differently than we do. Practice peace with them. Have conversations, be curious. Be willing to say “well, we think differently on that, but I want to hear your point of view. Why do you feel that way?” and try in good faith to get beyond the rhetoric to the feelings, concerns, fears and hopes.

I know a lot of people in the Bay Area avoided their relatives in red states at Thanksgiving. Maybe it was still too raw for everyone. But it’s time to take a really deep breath and start thinking about how we can co-exist at a deeper level with those who come from a different place than we do. One opportunity is to come to a workshop on Dynamic Dialogue we are hosting here on February 4. We could all learn about dialogue as skill for peace! And you’ll see some opportunities for dialogue hosted by the Marin Interfaith council.

Our Rabbi-Presbyterian Pastors group is moving into new territory. Scott Quinn, interim director of MIC is leading us into deeper dialogue about our hopes for this group. My recent dialogue with Rabbi Susan Leider of Kol Shofar has informed me greatly during this time of unrest. While the Rabbis and their congregations continue to feel disheartened by the PCUSA vote because they felt it was tone deaf to the multi-faceted history of the Jewish people, they want to stay in conversation and get to know us. They’ve learned not to paint all Presbyterians with the same paint brush. And we are gradually learning how complex the historical issues are, and that Jewish people have a great range of views.

We’ve learned to not turn away from one another. We’ve learned to stay and talk.

The day after the election, when I stepped into congregation Rodef Sholom for an interfaith gathering, there was unity and love between us. There was a web of relationship that had already developed in that room, and there was a sense that we were all there for one another, come what may. Don’t you wonder how the election process might have gone if both parties had stayed in conversation with the great diversity of thinking throughout this country?

Were you as struck as I when viewing the election maps, that there really is no such thing as red and blue states? Within each state there is a patchwork of different outlooks depending on urban or rural location, depending on who were lucky enough to be educated and whether people were well-fed or struggle to feed their families?

Finding places for compassion is where to begin and taking the time to listen comes next. A long process and it's not easy. We must make connection and stay in connection to gain understanding.

We keep God's image of peace before us. And then it boils down to individual acts. As you know, there have been many raging fires in Israel, thought to be terrorist arson. On Saturday, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to thank him for sending fire trucks and personnel to fight the blazes.

Palestinian fire crews assisted Israeli crews in northern Israel and near Jerusalem. Netanyahu heralded the fact that Jews and Arabs alike opened their homes to victims of the fire. An Israeli police spokesman tweeted images of the Palestinian firefighters working alongside their Israeli counterparts in Haifa.

Author Alan Brehm offers some additional insight. He wrote:

"The prophet Isaiah saw God's justice and peace as light that brings life to the nations. He believed that the extent to which the Jewish people themselves became living light, the nations would be attracted to that light and come streaming to learn the ways of God and to hear the word of the Lord. And so he urged the people of Israel and Judah to "walk in the light of God" (Isa. 2:5). "

"The good news is that the light of God—God's gracious presence—is available to us all. That means we can choose to be the kind of people who are essentially living light, living out of a spirit of kindness and generosity and compassion."ⁱⁱ

As we begin the pilgrimage of Advent, may we cultivate our quality of spirit and the attitude of our hearts toward peace.

Regardless of our external circumstances, we can choose our attitude and cultivate peace within ourselves. And that makes all the difference in how we act and how we relate to others.

We can pace ourselves and not react. We can wage peace even in the midst of conflict. We have real work to do here and it begins with each one of us. To watch our words and tone as we speak.

And we can reach out in compassion and seek to understand what is behind the thoughts and feelings of others. May we stay with the vision of peace; may we stay in connection with one another.

And for those things that are outside our control? The world is with us. It will not go away. Pray for the place where peace may emerge. Wherever it is needed, where there is brokenness. Praying is a real action. Creating a field of love and peace through prayer is a real act.

During Alan's reflection, I invite you, if you are able, to light a candle as a symbol of your prayers... prayers for personal internal peace, for internal peace for our leaders and for peace in this world. As we light the candles, one by one, the promises of God will be among us and we will learn a little more what it means to stay with the vision of peace.

For out of Zion The Word of God will come and teach us. We light candles and in their light, we see more clearly.

We sing our waiting Advent songs... these are the songs of peace, love, joy and hope.

And we believe that Christmas is coming.

Let us walk in the light of God!

ⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Real-Peace-John-Holbert-11-22-2013?offset=1&max=1>

ⁱⁱ <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/02/living-light-isa.html>