

Sermon 1 December 2013 Advent 1 A
Isaiah 2: 1-5
Revd Susanna Pain

PEACE

It came to me while I was sitting in front of the fire with the snow dancing outside, while I was on retreat in Santa Fe last week, that peace is about transformation. Swords are not thrown away, but transformed into plough shears, spears into pruning hooks. They are transformed.

The person, nation, religion, political party we hate is not discarded. The part of my self I dislike is not cut off... our attitude is changed.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes (p 295 My Grandfather's Blessings)

"Life wastes nothing. Over and over again every molecule that ever has been is gathered up by the hand of life to be reshaped into yet another form. The molecules in you and me and indeed in everyone are second-hand, borrowed for the occasion and returned when outgrown. How strange to think that great pain may be impermanent. Something in us all seems to want to carve it in granite, as if only this would do full honour to its terrible significance. But even pain is blessed with impermanence; slowly, drop by drop, it may be worn away until even the most devoted searcher cannot find it unless they look for compassion or some other form of wisdom."

Yet waiting takes time. Transformation takes time. Peace takes time.

Whatever is precious takes time. Two cells join, and divide and divide and divide and divide. It takes nine months, give or take, for a baby to be born, and even then that is not the end, but the beginning of something else.

As I wrote this sermon Liz was trying to light a fire. She had been out in the snow collecting wood and sticks and bark. She had been at it for at least 20 min. Finally, the fire burst into flames - the wood gradually transformed into heat and ash.

I sat beside the fire soaking up the warmth. It will not last, but for now, I enjoy it.

A company called Fonderie 47 harvests and destroys AK-47s and other assault rifles using the metal to create high-end luxury

earrings and cuff links. That is one way of transformation and working for peace.

'In a time of war, wreckage and fear, the prophet Isaiah proclaims God's destruction of war and construction of peace –

He challenges us to act with God

- To break down our warring ways and
- To build up our peaceful ways

War was a nearly daily part of life in ancient Israel, primarily because of the nation's small size and valuable location. A parcel of land less than half the size of Tasmania, ancient Israel was surrounded on all sides by nations who wanted to own it. Biblical scholars remind us that in the lives of the ancient Israelites, there was only 'war time' and 'preparing for wartime'. In this context, to speak of peace and pacifism showed especially audacious faith.' (Seasons of the Spirit Advent 2013 p 32)

'In a surprising role-reversal, 'the nations' are the eager learners of God's teachings of peace, coming to Zion gladly. Elsewhere, the prophets point to the nations as bad influences, but here, Isaiah admonishes Israel to come and relearn God's ways, following the lead of their enemies-turned-teachers. Zion, Israel's moral centre and locus of worship, is the place where all the world is willingly, gladly travelling to God's word in order to learn and practice peace.

Isaiah could have painted a picture of a time to come when all nations will only lay down their weapons and live in peace. But acting out God's peace, it seems, means more than just quitting conflict. Crucial to Israel's prophecy is the more active, participatory nature of peacemaking; all must make the journey to a common table to unlearn war. Martin Luther King Jr's wisdom echoes loudly: 'Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice.' Seeking justice means action, and the verbs the nations use in verse three ('go up', 'teach', and 'walk) illustrate this powerfully.

"Just as war is learned, so is peace. Like his contemporary Micah (4:1-3), Isaiah proclaims that in God's new world, not only must the weapons be destroyed; they are transformed and repurposed. So it is with our habits, personally and nationally. We cannot simply cease our methods and manners; they must be replaced with new habits, new words, new frames of thought."

Frederick Buechner writes that "For Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the present of love." Seasons of the Spirit p32

I think about a good friend's fiancée that I held a grudge against for a long time. I felt hurt by him, for many years, and it got in the way of my relationship with my friend. I don't know how it came up – maybe a sermon or a talk I went to, but I decided to pray for that person, to lift him up before God, to ask God to forgive him even though I could not. I prayed for him every day for what seemed like a long time. I asked God to forgive him, and to help me to forgive him...

Slowly, slowly things began to change, slowly, slowly I softened, I let go of my pain and my anger, slowly, slowly. I somehow was able to love and accept him – it took time, and effort and much prayer but I changed. And my relationship with my friend and her husband was transformed. I still don't see them often, though they live in Canberra, but my heart is open and there is deep affection and peace between us and desire for each other's good.

Nikolai had some tricky times with his dad several years ago. Nikolai was very angry with his dad. He did a lot of praying, saw a counsellor, well me.. and for Nikolai too swords were beaten into ploughshares – words – the weapons of war, changed. Nikolai made a conscious effort to always act with love towards his 90-year-old dad. Their relationship is healing, though there are still deep wounds. His dad expresses his love too and in his own way he said sorry...

So there is the possibility of transformation but peace is work and takes time.

We need to be alert as the gospel invites, to stay awake...

To choose peace
And work towards it, as well as opening to that peace which passes all understanding.

Peace... I have spoken on long enough

What comes to your mind when you hear the word peace?

What image, colour, shape, word, story....? Peace.

On this first Sunday in Advent let's stay with this a bit longer -

Peace.

How can we be peacemakers? In our homes, our work, our nation, our world?

We make space this advent for peace to grow

Breathe deeply

Focus on peace

Take the image, the word, into your world this week...

Seek it out – peace

Be willing to be surprised by peace

Notice

Pay attention, let me know what you learn.

Peace with you – in noisy supermarkets and shopping malls,

Peace

In tired and cranky end of year homes

Peace

In political strife and disagreement

Peace

In your distracted mind

Peace

Sing: The peace of the earth be with you, the peace of the heavens too, the peace of the ocean be with you the peace of the rivers too. Deep peace flowing over you, God's peace flowing in you.

Martin Luther King Jnr wrote:

"I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright day break of peace and brotherhood/sisterhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final Word."

Nelson Mandela wrote

"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy, then she/he becomes your partner."

Susanna Pain