

“The Hard Work of Preparing the Way”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Psalm 85; Mark 1: 1-8

Last week, we began the Advent season with Third Isaiah, who reminded us that if we truly want God to come into our lives, we first need to come clean with God. We need to acknowledge our need for redemption and prepare ourselves to be reworked by God, our potter. This week, in the beautiful poetry of *Psalm 85*, which was written about the same time Third Isaiah prophesied during the restoration period after the Exile, we are given a glimpse of what the world would look like if God’s reworking was complete. Following Isaiah’s example, the psalmist celebrated all that God had done for the remnant of Israel by enabling them to return home, and forgiving the people their sins. He also acknowledged the people’s need for redemption by praying “Revive us again! Show us your unfailing love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.”

As Christians, we tend to think of salvation either in terms of getting into heaven or being forgiven our sins, or both. But in this poem, the psalmist was not praying for either. The salvation he sought was to dwell in the presence of God and the kingdom of God on earth once again. The kingdom would be visible in the four divine characteristics of God which would undergird and govern it: love, truth, righteousness, and peace. “Unfailing love and truth have met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed! Truth springs up from the earth and righteousness smiles down from heaven.” With beautiful words like that we don’t have to guess why the Lectionary assigned such a vision to the second Sunday of Advent, peace Sunday. In the image of the kiss we see divine and human relationships restored. In the image of the earth spouting truth fed by the sunlight of righteousness, we get a wonderful agrarian vision of a blossoming kingdom, not unlike the one that Jesus would offer centuries later in the parable of the sower. God the sower scatters the seed, and when it takes root in good soil, it produces an abundant crop which exceeds all expectations.

Do you know the old story about the woman who dreamed she walked into a shop and found God behind the counter? “What do you sell here?” she asked. “Everything your heart desires,” said God. Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for. “I want peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom from fear,” she said. Then as an afterthought, she added, “Not just for me, for everyone on earth.” God smiled. “I think you’ve got me wrong, my dear,” God said. “We don’t sell fruits here. Only seeds.”¹

We all want what the woman in the shop wanted, don’t we? Israel wanted these things too. Yet it is clear from thousands of years of human history that for reasons which are as yet beyond human understanding, God has no intention of reworking our world in the blink of an eye to make it fruitful in this way, at least not now. Instead God expects us to grow the seeds of God’s grace ourselves. So today I want us to consider the four seeds, or divine characteristics the psalmist offered us carefully.

¹ I do not know the original source of this story. A version of it is available at *Alternate Activity 1: Spiritual Circle- Song, Story and Seed*, at <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/multigenerational/gather/workshop> 8

The first divine characteristic upon which the kingdom of God will be built on earth is *hesed*, steadfast love. I've talked about this before because it's a recurring theme in the Bible. *Hesed* is not romantic love; it is the love embodied in God's covenants with humanity. *Hesed* is conscious, steadfast, unconditional love of God and neighbor. It includes within it compassion and kindness, mercy and understanding. *Hesed* is what God is made of, so it is both our means of salvation and an essential component of the kingdom of God.

The second divine characteristic is truth, which is *emet* in the Hebrew. Some translations of the psalm translate this word faithfulness, but in the context of a seed of the kingdom, I think truth is a better translation because Jewish tradition has long held that "Truth is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be he."² According to rabbinic commentaries, which ascribe great significance to the letters in words, not just the meaning of the words themselves, one of the ways that we know that truth comes from God is that the word *emet* is composed of three letters: aleph, from the beginning of the alphabet, mem, from the middle, and tav near the end. Thus the word reflects the comprehensiveness of God's truth. The letters themselves are also shaped in such a way that they rest solidly on their foundations. [Slide of the Hebrew letters shown.³] Contrasting this word with the word for falsehood, *sheker*, which is composed of letters from the end of the alphabet and teeters on the single point of the Qof in the middle, the Talmud concludes that God's truth endures forever while all human falsehoods ultimately collapse.⁴

The third divine characteristic of the kingdom is *tsedeq*, or righteousness. This can also be translated justice. *Tsedeq* is not self-righteousness, which our world has more than enough of these days. It's more righteousness in the sense of "right living," that is, living in right relationship with God and according to God's way. The word includes legal and moral right living, as well as equitable and relational right living in its meaning.

The last divine characteristic of the kingdom is *shalom*, peace. This is what we want and what we celebrate today. *Shalom* is not just the absence of war or conflict, it is, as Jesus put it, "the peace that passes understanding," the peace that embodies wholeness, completeness, contentedness, as well as being well-rested, and emotionally and spiritually satisfied. In God's *shalom*, crying and tears are no more. Strife and suffering have no place. We will all experience *shalom* one day in heaven with God. But in the psalmist's eschatological dream, one day we will all experience it on earth as well.

I think we would all be more than happy to have all four of these seeds grow and flourish in our world today. But before that can happen, we not only have to have far better growing conditions than we have today, we also have to recognize that these characteristics of God cannot be grown independently of one another. Here is where the seed analogy ends. When it comes to the characteristics of God, we are really dealing with something more like a Rubix cube, with God and humanity on two of the sides, and the four characteristics on the others. If you try to solve

² See e.g. Jacobs, Rabbi Louis, "Truth and Lies in the Jewish Tradition", My Jewish Learning, retrieved 12-5-17 from <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/truth-and-lies-in-the-jewish-tradition>.

³ אמת – Emet – truth; שקר – sheqer – falsehood

⁴ *Ibid*, [Truth and Lies in the Jewish Tradition](#).

one side without paying attention to the others, you will never succeed. You have to solve all of the sides simultaneously because you cannot have peace without love, righteousness without truth, and the kingdom of God without God, all of humanity, and the four characteristics which make for heaven on earth.

I've been thinking especially about the interconnectedness of truth, righteousness, and peace this week, as more and more public figures in our nation are being charged with harassing and abusing women, and the #MeToo meme on social media has let the cat so far out of the bag on the subject of systemic sexism and misogyny in our country that it will never be able to be stuffed back in again. Although I am a woman and a feminist and have my own stories of experiencing sexism as do every other woman I know, I did not want to talk about this topic in church. It's Advent. We all want comfort and joy this time of year, not controversy, me included. But what's going on in our country right now is too big to ignore; it's not a political issue, at least not exclusively. It is fundamentally a human issue.

More importantly, as the psalmist reminds us, ignoring the problem, being silent about the problem is one of the reasons we have the problem in the first place. For probably as long as men and women have existed, women have been told to keep the peace by keeping silent. Don't talk about the put-downs, the passes, the abuse because it won't do anything other than get you in trouble. You're the one who will be judged and dissected on the witness stand, not the perpetrator. The perpetrator has the power, and in the case of all the celebrities, the adoration of the masses too. Besides, "you probably asked for it, or misinterpreted it, or overreacted." But now, for reasons which are still not entirely clear given how high up in the ranks of leadership of our country misogynists can be found, women are not keeping silent any more. The truth is coming out and all the falsehoods upon which our nation's social contract has been built are teetering on the point of that little Qof, which is bending and cracking under the pressure.

This is the work of God, I believe, because truth, *emet*, is the seal of God. But as great as it is that so many women are standing up for the truth, and as great as it is that *Time Magazine* has recognized their courage in doing so, we still have a long way to go before we will get to experience God's shalom. This is a systemic problem as old as time, which means that there is still more truth to be told. One of those truths is that the Church has contributed to the problem. For centuries, women were told to remain in abusive marriages because of *Ephesians 5's* exhortation: "Wives be subject to your husbands." For centuries, women have been told to cover their heads and "Keep silent" or be castigated as sinners or heretics. For centuries, the Church has taught the stories of the patriarchs, glossing over details like the fact that Hagar had no choice in whether she wanted to bear Abraham a son, and was cast out into the desert after she did, and how Tamar had to prostitute herself to get Judah to do right by her, and how David's seduction of Bathsheba was a power play she couldn't refuse, not a star-crossed romance. The Church allowed Mary Magdalene to be cast in the role of prostitute even though the Bible never said she was one because her leadership became a threat to the Church patriarchy. The Church of the Middle Ages changed the names of the women apostles and ministers in the Bible, Junia, Phoebe, Nympha, into men's names in order to make sure no one would think that woman could be leaders in the faith. And although in the PC (USA) women have been allowed to be ordained, (think about that—allowed by whom?!) for almost a century as elders, and more than 60 years as clergy, there are still more denominations which insist that faithful women cannot be leaders in the Church

than those that insist they must. In many churches today, women still aren't even allowed to usher, and are required to look and dress a certain way to demonstrate their purity. "Women keep silent," the Church has said, tossing most of God's holy seeds out the window in favor of keeping a false kind of peace.

But now the peace has been disturbed. It doesn't feel good, especially when men we have admired are accused of behaviors we never imagined they would do. It doesn't feel good having to talk about these things in Church after so many centuries of politely looking away. But we must not perpetuate the silence. We must speak out for the truth and know that it's just going to be uncomfortable until that truth has been met and blessed by the other characteristics of God. For truth to grow and thrive, it must be met by righteousness and justice, which has only begun to happen. For peace to thrive, truth and righteousness must then be merged with love because God's kingdom is not run on the enforcement of black letter law or through a reward and punishment system. The kingdom runs on love because that is the saving presence of God. That love has been missing as much or more as truth and righteousness have these days. As Mother Theresa once observed, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."⁵ She didn't mean "belong" in the property to be controlled sense; there are plenty of people who still think of others that way. She meant belong in the divine covenant community sense of belong together. We are all children of God.

The role of women in society, and how women have been and should be treated are not the only issues about which the truth has been suppressed of course. Our nation still does not want to acknowledge the reality of systemic racism, as the whole football players taking a knee controversy demonstrated. "Keep silent," they also were told. "You can praise and worship this country. But if you point out what's wrong with it you aren't a patriot." We have yet to acknowledge fully as a nation the gross inequities of our economy in a way that justice is done too. We have yet to acknowledge our ethnocentricity and arrogance and fear. So many truths still lie buried in the ground that we have a long way to go, and it won't be easy work. Think of what both Isaiah and John the Baptist proclaimed to people like us who were stuck in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight a highway, make the rough places plain and the mountains low." That's a tall order. But it's not impossible because we were given in Christ an example of how to live with righteousness, truth, peace, and love. We have been given the salvation about which the psalmist only dreams. So if we want to dwell in the kingdom on earth where unfailing love and truth meet together and righteousness and peace kiss, then all we have to do is follow Christ, and refuse to be silenced. We must nurture truth with righteousness, and nurture peace with love as he did.

Since peace is what we all yearn for, I'd like to close today with a poem from the late great Ann Weems, called *Searching for Shalom*.⁶ It describes beautifully, I think, how it is hard to find peace on earth as long as untruths and injustice prevail. But it also reminds us that God's shalom is not absent. We have been saved; God's presence is with us. So we will find the peace we seek in Christ.

⁵ As quoted in Siker, Judy Yates, "All Will be Well... 'A Reflection on an Elusive Shalom,'" THE LIVING PULPIT, Oct.-Dec., 2006 at 9.

⁶ Weems, Ann, *Searching for Shalom* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991),19-21.

I keep searching for shalom,
drawing my water from one well after
another—
but still I thirst
for the shower of blessings
that is shalom.

I yearn
for life to be just and merciful and peaceful,
but the streets are filled with daily deaths
of spirit and of flesh
. . . but no shalom.

I keep searching for shalom,
away from crowds and commotion,
but peace and quiet
don't blot the pain
of broken hearts and broken bodies.

I keep searching for shalom,
thinking perhaps I'll find it
in a quiet field of flowers
or in star or sea or snow,
but still the innocent are trampled.

I keep searching for shalom,
standing in holy places,
sitting among saints.
Surely in the sanctuary
I will find shalom.

I keep searching for shalom,
but holy places
are not magic.
Good works and printed prayers
don't guarantee shalom.

Beyond cathedral walls
and above ethereal music,
the blaring din of death persists.
Back in the streets,
the people walk in darkness.

I keep searching for shalom.
I have pursued
and sought it.
Have I looked in all
the wrong places?

What is this bonding,
this glue among us,
this cohesiveness
that holds us in the hope
of shalom?

The longing won't die.
The hope keeps emerging
like a new sprout
that perseveres on the stump
of a felled tree.

Even in the daily barrage
of obscenities
some new star melts
into my eyes
and the promise persists.

Here in the darkness
some new light
stirs within me.
Here in the streets
I find shalom.

Shalom lives
not in the sanctuary,
but in the streets . . .
in chaos
on a cross.

In the face of Jesus
is the peace
that passes all understanding
the everlasting Sabbath . . .
Shalom!