

GOT PEACE?

Isaiah 2:1-5

An elementary school teacher was visiting the zoo on her day off when she walked past the lions cage and was amazed by what she saw. The king of the jungle was sleeping peacefully alongside several lambs. Recognizing the possibilities of teaching the true meaning of co-existence to her students she sought out the zoo director. "How did you ever manage to accomplish such an extraordinary alliance?" she asked. "It's actually quite simple," the director replied, "We just add a few fresh lambs every now and then."

This is exactly how I feel when the topic of Middle East peace is brought up. We should have a billboard advertisement campaign that would say, "Got Peace?" just like they do with milk because it has become so cheap. This week's meeting in Annapolis was held with the intention of starting some peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This feels like what Ambrose Bierce once said about peace in international affairs, "a period of cheating in between two periods of fighting." In my lifetime, there have been way too many "peace" meetings to really hold on to any hope for a major change in that conflict. People come to the table with the same ideas and expect others to change. Every time there is a peace meeting, people sit there and pretend that they want to work things out, but then they turn around and do the opposite of what they promised. The state of Israel has promised over and over again to stop illegal settlements on Palestinian lands but not one time have they delivered on their promise. Palestinians keep holding on to their anger and hurt over the loss of their land. And the violence continues on. They don't seem to get it that you can't force peace into existence. I love what Parker Palmer said about confrontation, "Confrontation often falls short of transformation." We expect to change people's minds through confronting them, but it never works.

So thinking about peace is very difficult. Peace, like love, is an over-used word and an under-used reality. The vision of Isaiah from today's reading is recited around the Advent season as God's vision for all nations. God revealed to Isaiah that peace for Jerusalem is about not learning war any more. Peace is about all the nations being able to come together to worship and let go of their weapons. The interesting thing about Isaiah's vision is that it was not popular then and it is not popular now. For his people, they thought everything was going fine: the kingdom seemed powerful and shrewd, the priesthood proud and the market-place buoyant. They hated their neighbors, the Assyrians and they fought against them. They neglected the poor, the orphans and widows. They defined peace on their own terms. Isaiah, like all prophets, saw through these lies. He accused the ruling elites of violating the rights of the common people in their drive to amass quick wealth and political power (Is. 1:12, 3:13-15, & 5:1-10). He tried to remind them of the vision of God for peace, but people didn't like listening. They liked to control their own destiny. I mean faith is nice and all, but real life requires that we get tough and fight for our rights and privileges.

Isaiah's vision is challenging to us today as we still fall into the trap of greed, violence and control. As long as people keep trying to control each other, there will be no peace. And the funny thing about our human history is that we keep repeating the same patterns of behavior expecting things to change in the world. Every Empire in the world has done the same thing: control people, abuse power and control resources. Even on a personal level, most people who get into positions of power often get corrupted by these positions. Albert Einstein said, "The world we have created is a product of our ways of thinking. It cannot be changed until we change those ways of thinking." Isaiah's vision shows us a different way to approach peace. This peace is not based in our human abilities to reason and work things out. This peace is not based on our ability to spend more money on war. This peace which Isaiah is revealing to us is based in God. It comes from God and is maintained by God. The major obstacle we have is listening to God, allowing God to shape our views and our ways of interaction with others. We often think that we know what God wants, but rarely do we take the time to listen because listening to God is very hard. Listening to God is not always exciting. In fact, sometimes it is downright painful because we have to let go of our agendas and illusions. We should have a warning in the bulletin every Sunday saying: "Listening to God can change your mind, listen at your own risk."

I know that last week, I talked about our "emotional programs for happiness" as Father Thomas Keating defines them under the three categories of power/control, affection/esteem, and security. These are the ways we use to find happiness in life. So, as we think about listening to God, we have to be willing to let go of our control. Listening to God is a lifelong spiritual discipline. We are unfortunately rarely taught how to listen to God. Even when we pray we have our long lists to tell God about without anytime to be quiet and listen. Think

about when we have some silence in worship. Most people get nervous and start thinking about what's next. We even have a hard time truly listening to each other. But there is so much power in deep listening. And it is the only way to lasting peace.

The story is told about a Native American tribe, about the power of listening. From time to time, the tribe gathered in a circle. They just talked and talked and talked, apparently to no purpose. They made no decisions. There was no leader. And everybody could participate. There may have been wise men or wise women that were listened to a bit more - the older ones - but everybody could talk. The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. They could get together in smaller groups and do something or decide things. Listening to each other changed everything for them. This is how it would be for us if we listened to God on a regular basis.

Our culture is challenged in this area because of the technology that is available to us. Yet, we have an opportunity ahead of us. We are entering the season of Advent today which is a season of preparation, waiting, and listening. So, as part of your preparation: in your bulletin today, there is an invitation for "Faith in Action" practices of listening to God. I hope that you will take the insert home. One of the practices is called Lectio Divina, which is Latin for "Holy Reading." This is a great way to listen to the Holy Spirit speak to you and transform your life. I hope that you will find uninterrupted times to be in the presence of God to listen.

(cell phone rings). Oops, excuse me, I have to get this. "Hello, who is it? Oh, it's God! What are you doing calling me on a Sunday morning when I am preaching? I have a whole congregation of yours here who is trying to listen to your word. Can we talk later? I know that I have been really busy lately. But it has been all about your work... You have something important to tell me about world peace... I promise I will find a time today or tomorrow to listen, maybe after the installation service and reception or first thing in the morning!"

May we always find the courage to listen to God so that our ways of control and violence are transformed into God's ways of peace and love. Peace is possible only when we are transformed by God's Spirit. Amen.