

“True Peace”  
Isaiah 40:1-11

Today is the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. On this Pearl Harbor Day, sixty seven years after the December 7, 1941 attack, we are reminded of the vulnerable nature of our lives. This day is especially important in our American history because it was the first time in our modern history when we faced an attack on our own soil. Americans believed for a long time that we were immune to such attacks. But this day changed that perception forever. Days like this one happen over and over again all over the world on communal and personal levels. On such occasions we find ourselves wondering if there is ever going to be peace and justice in our world. And how do we react to this sense of disillusionment and insecurity?

Our natural predictable reactions that come from our survival instincts are either fight or flight. We become angry/violent or run away/escape from the problem. In our culture today the flight reaction is best expressed by two phrases we hear all the time: "Duh" and "Yeah, right." An article in the *New York Times* recently said that there is something oddly appropriate that these two phrases have become so common among teenagers. Simply to say "Yes" or "No" doesn't fit our uncertain and cynical world. In the old days, it was a yes-or-no world. It was us versus the communists and we pretty much knew who was who. But now we live in a world of hype and media manipulation, a world where terrorists lurk in the bushes. Now few things are certain and doubt is the norm of the day. It seems that no matter what anyone says these days, someone will answer with either, "Duh!" or "Yeah, right." Tell most people that you really ought to trust our elected officials, and they'll likely say, "Yeah, right." On the other hand, tell most people that a certain political or religious leader has fallen into trouble, and they'll respond, "Duh." We're only sure about one thing these days and that is that we should never be sure about much.

Our fight reaction to our sense of vulnerability is demonstrated by our need to find a quick fix for all of our problems. Violence seems to fit the bill. If someone attacks us, we must retaliate and attack them. And we have good justifications for our actions. It is interesting to read the news about the surge in gun sales after the election of Barack Obama. His election seemed to trigger the fear of some that he might take away their freedom to own guns.

The problem with both reactions is that outside of basic protection they rarely change anything. They often leave us with the same sense of vulnerability and insecurity that we started with. So, how are we to react?

The people of Israel who are being addressed by the Prophet Isaiah in our reading today were in a very tough spot. Chapter 40 begins a section in the book of Isaiah when the people had already been exiled. This was after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 to the Babylonian Empire. Isaiah was speaking to a disheartened people who were driven out of their homes and thrown into new land as refugees. They felt that all was lost, even their hope. Even those who were allowed to stay were left to see the destruction of their temple and the desecration of all that is holy and precious to them. There was no peace in their land or in their hearts. But the prophet here speaks to them a word of incredible comfort and hope. *Nahumu, nahamu 'ommi*, "Comfort, comfort my people" were the words that the prophet brought to them. They sound like a lullaby for people who have endured so much pain. These were words that reminded the people of the true source of their hope and peace: the covenant of love that God has established with them. Nothing can take that away from them. That commitment for God to love them, was never going to change. This is their true security and their true anchor in life. Their invitation was to persevere because God was with them guiding their steps. But perseverance is one of those

hard virtues in life. Our gut reaction to pain is to fight or run away. But the work of God's love, peace and justice in our lives and in the world requires a great deal of perseverance and patience. We like heroic actions because they seem to happen quickly. What we seem to not realize is that even the greatest heroes and models of faith are people who spent a great amount of time persevering and preparing. In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ spent 95% of his human existence with little to no public fame or ministry. Many believe that these were the years of his spiritual preparation. Rosa Parks, long before her famous sit-in on the bus in Alabama in 1955, had been involved in non-violent resistance and civil right training for several years. Martin Luther King Jr.'s major transformation took place when he learned about Gandhi's ways of nonviolence. He heard a sermon that included some of the ideas that Gandhi promoted but then he went and bought several books and studied for a long time. No quick fixes in any of these great stories and others like them. Certainly this is the case with God's love. Look at the tremendous amount of patience God has for the continued creation and redemption process of our world and our lives. This was certainly the message that the Prophet Isaiah communicated to the people. The spiritual writer and Presbyterian Kathleen Norris says this about patience, "In our violent and unsettled times, some religious extremists, both Christian and Muslim, appear to be impatient for a death sentence to be imposed upon the entire human race. Better to cleanse this world by destroying it than to let us go about our complacently wicked ways. If this seems to have a twisted logic, our scripture readings make it clear that this is human weakness, after all. For God's strength is, and ever has been, patience and forbearance."

So part of our spiritual journey is to cultivate patience and calm in our lives and in our work for justice and peace. This kind of deep peace that we need on this journey of life can only come from the Holy Spirit. The temptation to fall into our patterns of fight and flight is too great. In order to find the strength to continue on this journey of working for God's peace, we must let go of the illusions of quick fixes. The methods we use for creating peace are just as important as the results themselves. Cultivating inner peace is our path. But it is hard work and takes rigorous training and discipline.

A couple of months ago, I had the privilege of getting to know Heather Lee Iwanicki, Don and Corrine's daughter. Heather lives in Australia but was here to go to a training on peacemaking in Orlando, Florida. The last few years, Heather and her husband have dedicated a great deal of their time and resources to these intentional efforts of peacemaking because they both know that this kind of work has to be intentional. Peacemaking is not about being passive or being a doormat. It takes a lot of strength and training to be a true peacemaker.

The message of comfort and love of the Prophet Isaiah is a much needed message of hope for us today when we find ourselves in those places of desperation, deep pain or injustice. It is a great reminder about the source of our strength and our need to be persistent and patient. This is the work of peace we are invited during this season of Advent. This is work of peace that we do as we come to be fed at the table of God's love today. This is our invitation to prepare the way of the Lord.

Once two frogs were merrily hopping along. They were having so much fun together that they didn't notice where they were going and ended up jumping right into a pail of fresh milk! They swam around and around trying to get out, but the sides of the pail were too steep and slippery. For a long time they struggled on, but there seemed to be no way to escape. Finally, the older frog lost all courage. "I can't go on like this any longer," he cried. "I'm too tired and there's no hope of us ever getting out of here." "Don't give up, dear brother," urged the younger frog. "Have faith. Surely there must be a way." "It's no use," replied the older one. "We'll never get out of here alive, all is lost." And with that cry on his lips, the older frog gave up and sank to the bottom of the pail. It made the little frog very sad to lose his dear friend, but gathering up all his courage and hope he became more determined than ever not to give up. "To give up is to be

dead. I must keep on trying to get out," he told himself. More hours passed and the young frog's legs became so tired that he could barely move them. "Oh, why go on?" he asked himself, but then he remembered his dead friend lying at the bottom of the pail. This sobering thought gave him new strength. "As long as I'm alive, I must keep trying," he again told himself. So with great effort, the young frog continued to paddle around in the bucket, chopping the milk into little white waves as he went. Then an amazing thing happened. Suddenly the little frog found himself standing in the pail on something solid. He looked down and discovered that he had churned the milk into butter by his constant paddling around! So, thanks to his great courage and determination the brave young frog was able to jump out of the pail and was once again safe and free.

Let us continue together in faith as we prepare the way of the Lord in our work of love, justice and peace.