

Palisades Presbyterian Church

***Third Sunday in Ordinary Time***

January 21, 2007

*Reflection*

"Often, when I feel in an emotional desert, I call up something I saw when I was studying in Israel during a college summer. I was on a bus that was traveling through the Judean desert - tons of extreme heat and aridity, nothing but red dust and rocks, rocks, rocks as far as I could see. I'd gotten on the bus to go see Masada, but I began to wonder why I was giving up so much of my day to just travel through endless dust and mountains of bare rocks. And then we came around a hill, we were nearing Ein Gedi - and suddenly there was this lush greenness, palm trees, a huge waterfall with all kinds of beautiful flora growing around it. It was amazing to me - a wonder of God and modern technology combined. And I never saw it coming, right up to the minute we took that turn and it was upon us. I often try to hold onto that image when I've been in the desert for a while - that who knows but God has something wonderful and life-filled right around the corner waiting even though we can't see it coming. And in the meanwhile, during the "bus ride" through the desert, maybe the sorting and sifting and ruminating is preparing the way for that something wonderful to be felt as even more wonderful."

- Susan DeGeorge



Readings: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The Gospel According to Luke 4: 14-21

Hymns: #260 A Mighty Fortress is Our God

#394 There is a Balm in Gilead

#555 Now Thank We All Our God

---

***A Prayer of Peace***

Almighty God, whose will it is to hold both heaven and earth in the peace of your kingdom: Give peace to your Church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts; through your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

I want to read you an excerpt from The Interpreter's Bible published in 1954. It is regarding this morning's First Testament reading on verses from Chapter 8 of Nehemiah. It can be found on page 732 of Volume 3:

***Repentance a Road to the Joy of Forgiveness:*** There is general agreement among O.T. scholars that this chapter was originally part of the Ezra story. There is likewise a widespread belief that the events it narrates, like the expedition of Ezra as a whole, took place after Nehemiah's first visit to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. to rebuild its walls – possibly during or after his second visit in 433. The Chronicler, as usual little concerned with historical accuracy, and ready to use any existing sources for his present purposes, is very much concerned to emphasize and dignify the religion of the law. He now makes use of this other material to dramatize its importance, and to ascribe to the earlier days of Nehemiah and Ezra the origin of the feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sukkoth), which had come to be widely celebrated in its own times.

“But along with these evident interests of the genealogist and the ceremonialist go certain insights into vital religion of every age.”

A little background on Ezra and Nehemiah gleaned from different places, easily accessible with a search or two on the Internet:

Ezra was a priestly scribe who is thought to have led about 5,000 Israelite exiles living in Babylon to their home city of Jerusalem in 459 BCE. Many scholars credit him as the author of the *Book of Ezra* and *Book 1 of Chronicles*.

Nehemiah lived during the period when Judah was a province of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah had been appointed royal cup-bearer at the palace of Shushan. The king, Artaxerxes I (Artaxerxes Longimanus), appears to have been on good terms with his attendant, as evidenced by the extended leave of absence granted him for the restoration of Jerusalem. Primarily by means of his brother Hanani, Nehemiah heard of the mournful and desolate condition of Jerusalem, and was filled with sadness of heart. For many days he fasted and mourned and prayed for the place of his fathers' sepulchres. At one point the king observed Nehemiah's sadness and asked what it was all about. Nehemiah explained what was going on to the king, and was given the Artaxerxes' permission to go to Jerusalem and act as *tirshatha*, or governor of Judea and do what he could to improve conditions.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in the 20th year of Artaxerxes I reign, (445/444 BC) with a strong escort supplied by the king, and with letters to assure his safe passage.

The Book of Nehemiah puts the historical record of Nehemiah's mission in a theological context. Viewed from a political angle, some say his actions were the result of the Persians' desire for increased security in the area and enhancement of the imperial court. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the Egyptian revolt continued with increasing military presence. The security concerns of the Persian Empire required some strategic reforms, namely the refortification of Jerusalem (building up the walls) and proper categorization (such as a ban on intermarriage) of people living in the Levant.

So, we have for us in this morning's Old Testament or First Testament readings the blending of authors, politics, religion, and interpretations of a people seeking some respite from oppression, marginalization, dominance, captivity, slavery, and maybe the sense that somehow what they had done had brought all this upon them. There is always inherent in these stories the twin head of guilt and redemption, it seems.

But peace? Were these folk of ancient times seeking peace or a peaceful encouraged heart amidst the turmoil of the times? Listen to the words again and see what you think.

"For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.  
<sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

No matter what, remember – God is with you. Go in peace. Build the walls. Go in peace.

Five hundred years forward in this biblical time machine...

We're in a Palestinian synagogue, worship consists of the recitation of the Shema, a prayer, a fixed lection reading from the Law (parashah), a free lection from the Prophets (haphtarah), and an explanation and application of one or both of the scriptural passages, followed by a blessing by a priest or a prayer by a layman. An invitation to read and to preach could be extended by the ruling elders to any competent member of the congregation or visitor. It was the practice to stand up and read and to sit down and preach.

Jesus is in this temple – as was his custom. He was known there from what we can tell. He is handed the haphtarah and reads from Isaiah:

<sup>18</sup>"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me

to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus must have been dramatic, compelling:

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

<sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

We don't know what if anything else he might have said. If this all took place as described, it might have been something like: I am called and will follow this charge signed in the anointment of my baptism by John the Baptist, an act of solidarity of God and man against the oppressors. I have committed myself to releasing the captives, recovering sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free: In other words....

- to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor  
to all the oppressed: do not be grieved, for the joy of the  
LORD is your strength
- and mine!

It's a span of roughly 500 years. It seems that the existing civilizations during that passage of time had little success in eradicating oppression and all its tentacles. In fact, in many ways, things had gotten worse. Yes, there were times of relative calm, but they were more like the eye of a storm than the dissipation of its force.

Peace? It seems not. I searched the word peace in a concordance for the entire Bible and found it occurred 114 times. Frequently, it is used as a greeting: Genesis 44:17 as when Joseph addresses his brothers: "...go back to your father in peace..."

Or as a way of doing something, such as in Deuteronomy: 20:10 "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace...Shalom, that is, safety, friendship, or, yes, peace from war."

And in the New Testament there are 79 references to peace, most are the same: "Peace be with you, Go in Peace, Your faith has saved you, go in peace..."

## New Testament: Eirene ( i-ray'-nay: Peace –Greek)

1. a state of national tranquility
  - a. exemption from the rage and havoc of war
2. peace between individuals, i.e. harmony, concord
3. security, safety, prosperity, felicity, (because peace and harmony make and keep things safe and prosperous)
4. of the Messiah's peace
  - a. the way that leads to peace (salvation)
5. of Christianity, the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is
6. the blessed state of devout and upright people after death

All in all, Matthew has two references, Mark 1, Luke 13, John 5, Acts 7, and Romans 11

And perhaps, what is stirring in you are the most notable of “peace verses,” some maybe wanting to raise their hands and say, ok what about:

[Joh 14:27](#) **Peace** I leave with you, my **peace** I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

[Joh 16:33](#) These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have **peace**. ***In the world ye shall have tribulation:*** but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

[Joh 20:19](#) Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut ***where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.***

[Joh 20:21](#) Then said Jesus to them again, **Peace** be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, ***even so send I you.***

[Joh 20:26](#) And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ***Peace be unto you.***

Even in a world, where "...ye shall have tribulation..." Peace be with you...

It occurs to me that as long as we see Jesus as some kind of a magician, we will have unreasonable expectations about things such as peace. As long as we do the linear lingo, with peace as a point that is accomplished through the enlightened efforts of human intelligence, endeavor, and spirit – we risk ending up living in the meaninglessness, disappointment, and despair of Sartre, Nietzsche, and others who found themselves isolated, separated, and removed in order to cleanse themselves and *be at peace* – tumbling intentionally into a state of denied nihilistic despair – and then protecting that condition as their place of empty harmony in the absence of discord. Peace?

So, what then – if even **Jesus** could not forge peace, what then – are we coming to the nearing end of *The Fire Sermon* in Eliot's *The Wasteland*?

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights.  
The nymphs are departed.  
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.  
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...  
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

Yes, unless...

Unless we think a little more about Jesus' life. "**My** peace I give you, **my** peace I leave you..." **My peace...**

It is not the peace to an end of war or oppression, but a peace that invites the courage of heart and being – not the courage of despair, as Paul Tillich refers to it.

When we pray for peace, for what do we pray? The end of war, violence, oppression, death? Do we pray that another Black Hawk helicopter will not be lost as one was yesterday; marking it the third most deadly day for US troops in Iraq with a total of 22 dead? Of course, we pray for the end to such horrors.

And do we also pray for loved ones to come home from places of conflict and danger around the world, and leaders to make right decisions, and hunger to be eliminated, and ... and... and... of course.

But is that the peace of Jesus? Jesus who was mortally caught up in the midst of First Century Palestine, executed on the cross – the oppressor's tool now overcome and a symbol against everything the oppressor stood for –

Is that the peace we pray for...sure, yes...

For all these meanings of peace and in peace we pray...yet,

peace can't be applied like a topical ointment to different ills and ever be accumulated enough to heal the limited human condition...

In life there will be tribulations...Jesus told us so.

The poor will always be with you...Jesus told us so.

So...

Want to end the war? End it. Pray for its end. Do everything you can to end it.

Support the war? Support it. Believe we need to do this. Believe it.

Support those in office, trying to get into office, having been in office – want to run for office – do it!

Believe we need to overcome terrorism...believe it...help to do it!

Through prayers for peace and action...

Always with peace in mind, always, I hope.

But I don't believe that is the road to peace that is transfigured upon the cross.

That's a different peace. I think it's the peace that Jesus knew when all hell was breaking loose – in the midst of it all in the Garden of Gethsemane: put down your sword when it was raised against the centurion. That peace. Wasn't about the sword...

Divine Peace. The peace that is ever-present in the heart, the center of being and creation according to every classical definition – it is the ever-present – glimmering spirit of God: the Shekinah. No matter what...the peace, that in Max Ehrman's *Desiderata* is referred to perhaps as the nurtured strength of spirit that

shields us in sudden misfortunes and cautions us from distressing ourselves with dark imaginings.

The nurtured strength of God. The God that is always present and unknowable beyond our limitations, yet active today in our lives as ever-before.

This is not a fix-it God, but a God of ancient and deep mystery that snatches up our worries and concepts of time and being into a power that is beyond anything describable...and when we pray and touch that power: that is the peace that Jesus knew – a deep and ancient luxurious eternal peace beyond all understanding of things and senses human.

He knew that peace, I am convinced of it. Not a peace marked by wars or absence of wars – a peace that passeth all understanding. The peace and love of God: the heart, if you will, of God and of us.

So let us pray for peace – and for an end to oppression as we draw more closely to the God of Jesus' peace in our lives.

Let us pray for peace and work for justice whether in waters that roll down like thunders or the gentle laugh of a child...let us be vigilant for peace.

But let us know the peace that reminds us we instruments of the One Peace - God: that we are not a designer of God's architecture - but of God's design.

And whatever the tribulation, let us face it together, as disciples, with courage and commitment and –

Then let us celebrate this day of the Lord in this time of the Lord's favor. For God is upon us...and still active in our world. God hears our prayers. Do we hear God's assurances?

Let us pray for peace, and act for peace, and carry the Good News – the language of the heart of God that is in us -- to all and beyond all – whether in the eye of the storm or the violence of its forces. On the streets or on the battlefields, wherever they may be.

For me, therein lies the peace I desire and always fall short of: the peace of the radical, itinerant, first century preacher, prophet, and convicted and executed felon who never long-wavered in the face of adversity – and left us his peace. That marvelous peace that brings us together 2000 years later. Who knows how, it just does.

May we have it now in our hearts. May we carry it forward to all we meet in all we do and pray for it for all our brothers and sisters in this time we share and all the times that are to come.



With you, I pray for such peace. For you, I wish such a peace in abundance.

Amen.

---

Desiderata by Max Ehrmann

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,  
and remember what peace there may be in silence.  
As far as possible without surrender  
be on good terms with all persons.  
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;  
and listen to others,  
even the dull and the ignorant;  
they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons,  
they are vexations to the spirit.  
If you compare yourself with others,  
you may become vain and bitter;  
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than  
yourself.  
Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble;  
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.  
Exercise caution in your business affairs;  
for the world is full of trickery.  
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;  
many persons strive for high ideals;  
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.  
Especially, do not feign affection.  
Neither be cynical about love;  
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment  
it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years,  
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.  
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.  
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.  
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.  
Beyond a wholesome discipline,  
be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe,  
no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,  
whatever you conceive Him to be,  
and whatever your labors and aspirations,  
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,  
it is still a beautiful world.  
Be cheerful.  
Strive to be happy.

Max Ehrmann, Desiderata, Copyright 1952.