

Seeking Peace

Year B, 2011, Advent 2

It was a bright sunny morning and the congregation had gathered in the sanctuary to join in song, prayer, and sacred story. Little Samuel was practically beside himself with joy. He had finally done it. After long years of waiting and watching the older children, this morning at quarter past the hour, Samuel got to ring the church bell. Now we're not talking about a little bell. We're talking about an enormous bell up in the tower of the church. Now if you've ever been fortunate enough to get to ring the church bell, you will know that it takes a person of a certain age, or rather size, to get the job done. If you're too little, you'll be stranded in mid-air. Ringing the church bell is a weighty job.

His father pulled rope down and held it while Samuel's little fingers grasped the thick, knotted rope. "Ready?" asked his Dad. "Ready!" grinned Samuel. As his father let go, Samuel felt a tug then floated up into the air. As the heavy bell reached its peak and began to sway back, Samuel's little toes gravitated towards the floor. He waited for the momentum then pushed off and floated back up into the air. Up and down he went as the bell rang out its greeting; welcoming the community to church.

As he ran off to his Sunday program with the other children, Samuel couldn't stop talking about "flying" into the air with the bell.

Later in the service, the adults of came to a time of Prayers for the People. It was their practice to stand up and share celebrations and concerns for themselves, their loved ones, and for people and places in the world. After a time of sharing, a stranger seated in the very last pew stood and called out to the minister at the front, "Do you ring your bell every Sunday?"

"Why, yes, we do," the minister replied.

"Well, I'd like you to stop."

"Oh?" asked the minister, nervously wondering where this conversation was going to lead.

"I work shift on the weekends and need to sleep Sunday mornings. You're bell wakes me up and I want you to stop ringing it."

"Um, if you'll meet with me after the service, I'd be happy to talk with you," the minister replied.

At that, the man turned and walked out the door.

After a moment of uncertainty, the minister offered a prayer for the stranger and promised to take his concern to Council to discuss how they might be more compassionate neighbours.

Samuel's father wondered if that might have been his son's first and only opportunity to ring the church bell.

At the close of the service, the minister walked to the door, still pondering the situation. And there, to his surprise, was the stranger sitting on the front steps. The minister, in his white robe, sat along-side him and thanked him for waiting. As his story unfolded, it turned out that the bell was the least of his problems. The peace he was seeking, was much deeper, much more complex than silencing a bell on Sunday morning. Perhaps little Samuel's exuberant bell-ringing was the catalyst that compelled the man to find the courage to walk into that church. Perhaps the man's instinct, his intuition, the presence of the Spirit within him, compelled him to reach out for help in that way. Perhaps the only way he knew how.

Seeking peace...

Our scripture passages this morning speak of a seeking people. In Isaiah, the Israelite community living in exile seek peace with their God. They seek forgiveness for their actions which separated them from YHWH, and the deep peace of a restored relationship and God-conscious way of living.

"Console my people, give them comfort," writes the author of Isaiah. "Clear a path through the wilderness of your lives. Make a straight road through the desert of your despair." Make space to receive the peace of YHWH.

Several centuries later the author of the Gospel of Mark re-interprets the Isaiah writings. There we find this odd character, John the Baptist living into the call to "prepare the way" by bringing an element of peace to people. Can't you just see him down by the river? Image that he looked straight into another's eyes as he listened to their stories of confession, and offered a fresh start through baptism. Perhaps it was in the sharing of their stories of struggle that the people found healing peace. Perhaps it was in being accepted that they were able to start anew. Their exile was not a physical one like their ancestors, but an emotional exile of separation from their God and separation from a way of life that honoured the Sacred. Perhaps they were a people seeking peace, just like their ancestors, just like the man in our story of the bell, and just like those of us today who are seeking to make space for the Holy in the cacophony of Christmas commercialism.

Seeking peace... seeking God.

Yesterday, 27 women gathered in the chapel for a day of retreat with Linda Mulhall. As we gathered, Linda invited us to name our intention for the day; to name what we hoped to receive during the retreat. Seeking peace was a recurring theme. The retreat was a wonderful gift of sacred space in this season of Advent. Time set apart to listen for the call of the Sacred. Silence, story, wisdom sharing, guided meditations, art-making, nature walks, and holy listening cleared our minds and opened our hearts to embrace the wholeness into which God invites us.

Linda asked this question, “If the soul only gets attention when there is time, when everything else is done, then how important is the soul?” Spending a day in retreat was balm for my soul. It re-grounded me in connection with the Sacred Presence I know as God. It invited me to embrace the Advent theme of expectant anticipation that the Holy can be born again... in me... in the 27 women.. in you... in all of us.

Seeking peace... seeking God.

For some of us, Christmas is a joyful time of connecting with family and friends, sharing festive foods, attending concerts, and delighting in the beauty of special decorations carefully unpacked from their summer slumber. For others of us, Christmas is difficult. It may be a struggle with chronic illness or wondering how to get through the first Christmas without a loved one. It can be a time when loneliness sinks like a heavy fog across one’s heart. It can be a time of regret over broken relationships and lost dreams. Or the struggle may be that there are too many demands on our time and our finances. These struggles can make one feel that they are all alone. That’s why the Pastoral Care Team is offering a Longest Night service again this year. We want folks who struggle at Christmas to know they are not alone; that there is a place to come together in all our humanity and struggle and tears to seek together the promises of the Christ child – a glimmer of hope, a glimpse of peace, and the knowledge that we are loved. Jesus said, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy-burdened and I will give you rest.” Come indeed. Whether it’s a retreat, a Longest Night service, or simply claiming space to light a candle and sit in silence with your soul, I pray that all of us might pause and seek the God that is so persistently seeking us.

Amen.