

A Covenant of Peace

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Christ the King

Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-31

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. ²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. ²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. ²⁶I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. ²⁹I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. ³⁰They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. ³¹You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

While I know this is not the most familiar passage of scripture, it has become a favorite of mine. I was introduced to this text during my first year in seminary. My Old Testament Professor, Sib Towner, walked into our class toward the end of Spring term in 1984. He prefaced his usual prayer for the beginning of class with an announcement that day. He said his good friend and mentor, Presbyterian pastor and long-time mission co-worker in Lebanon, Ben Weir, had just been taken hostage in Beirut. It would be 16 long months before his release and Ben Weir would then become one of the world's most widely respected voices for peace in the Middle East.

But on that first day of receiving the news of the Hostage Crisis in Lebanon, Ben Weir's dear friend stood before our Old Testament class with no small measure of emotion in his voice reading:

*"I will search for my sheep and will seek them out ...
I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,
I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak...
I will make with them a covenant of peace so that they may live securely...
I will send down showers of blessing..."*

This has become a passage of scripture to which I return in my mind and imagination when the rage and chaos of this world seem to overwhelm, when random gunfire erupts; when the bomb explodes, when the innocent are abused, when uncalled for violence is unleashed, and the world seems on edge with fear and trembling. It is a vision of God's intentions for the world for which I am profoundly thankful. It gives pictures to the words of Rachel's prayer with our children each week: "Dear God... be with us and keep us safe." The prophet Ezekiel is describing God's servant Son as the Shepherd who cares personally for each of us, searching for the lost, rescuing those who have strayed away, judging the nations for wrongdoing, and bringing all of creation into an endless season of peace. This is the prophetic source of our gospel image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, reigning forever with justice and gentleness as the King of Kings.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, marking the end of the Christian year before we begin again in Advent with our beloved rituals of celebrating the birth of the Christ Child. Christ the King is a Christian festival that the secular world just passes by, our minds already skipping from Thanksgiving to Christmas, but

in worship at least, we end the Christian year with a vision of God standing at the end of time painted in large strokes and the beautiful colors of nature. It is an enormous picture of God gathering all of humankind into harmony, so that, before we begin our journey to Bethlehem, before we tiptoe toward the manger in hushed tones of awe and wonder, before we behold anew the intimacy of God's love in swaddling cloth wrapped around baby Jesus, we arrive at the end of the church year with the grand vision of the peaceful, eternal reign over all creation of Christ the King. It is a vision of hope we so desperately need.

Sometimes the more interesting news is tucked inside smaller stories of the everyday person amid everyday struggles. A friend of mine shared with me such a story found hidden in his Midwest city newspaper. A man stops at the corner convenience store every weekday morning, on his way to work, to buy the daily paper. Each day he walks into the store, picks up the paper, puts his exact change on the counter, grunts a greeting at the clerk, and walks out. On this particular day he did exactly that. It took only about ten seconds. We know how long because it was recorded on the store's security camera. That videotape also showed the startled expression on the face of the robber, who was holding a gun to the head of the store clerk to whom the regular customer had mumbled his daily "Good morning." The customer, it seems, did not know any of this until he saw himself on the six o'clock news, as the reporter described the robbery and called everyone's attention to the oblivious person who came in to buy a paper in the middle of it, neither seeing the clerk nor noticing the robber.¹

I wonder if this little story speaks volumes about what all of us are up against as a people. Overwhelmed by the daily stresses swirling around us that, by necessity, we become focused and single-minded and can barely take in all the troubling things that are happening around us. The torrent of stories about harassment of late, one mass shooting after another, again in church and now mosque, the plight of the poor in our country and world, the continual concerns about the environment. If that is all that we can see and hear, it may feel safer to hunker down into a mindless routine, put the exact change on the counter, mumble a greeting, take what we went for, barely look where we're going, and to retreat into our own little worlds.

1) Story from John Cairns, Associate Pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, used in his sermon "Strong Bones, Healthy Temples," at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville.

But that is not all that we see and hear. What leads the evening news is counter to the good news of God's intentions for the human family and the whole creation. Into the trauma and uncertainty of our days, thus says the Lord: I will make with them a covenant of peace that they may have abundant lives. I will send down showers in their season and they shall be showers of blessing...In Hebrew the word is literally "showers of shalom" showers of health, well-being, wholeness; the best translation is "showers of peace." They will sleep securely, and no one shall make them afraid." This is the alternative vision for people of faith.

Against all the stress of our daily rounds, against the insidious violence, and story after story of the strong preying upon the vulnerable; this vision invites us to believe the fullness of what God is proposing in this covenant of peace. As Howard Thurman said, "The moving finger of God in human history points ever in the same direction. There must be community." ²

God gathers the scattered community together, like a good shepherd, rescuing those who have been scattered by cruelty and harsh treatment. The text emphasizes the immediacy of God's care by repeating the first person pronoun again and again: "I myself will search for my sheep... I will seek them out... I will rescue them... I will bring them together... I will feed the fat, strong, poor leaders with justice... and I will give my people the peace they so desperately need." What would it mean for us to raise our heads up from our daily routines and to seize this vision? To remember that in the midst of today's hardships God holds before us a future that is bright with wellbeing and peace... and to let this vision guide our actions. Two parties sign a covenant. The community God calls together is to serve as God's peacemakers.

Peter Storey, the Methodist minister who fought to keep the Church from becoming a mouthpiece for South Africa's Apartheid warned, "The Church must be different from, and often over against and in contradiction to, the ways of all nations. That alternative identity must be cherished and guarded as the most important characteristic of the Church." He concluded, "The richest gift the Church

2) Howard Thurman, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 471.

can give the world is to be different from it. It must be a constant irritant the world doesn't want, but cannot do without.”³

Surely God's vision of peace tied up with this sense of mission was at least part of what led to our Thanksgiving traditions. For the first Thanksgiving, feasts were held against a backdrop of scattering, of violence and of hardship. Remember how in the early 17th century the English Separatists went to Holland to escape the religious intolerance they were experiencing in England. By 1620 the Separatists were unhappy that their children were starting to speak Dutch better than English, and their young men were conscripted into the Dutch military. Moreover the Dutch did not keep Sabbath in the manner of the English, and they grew concerned the observance of the Lord's Day was a waning reality.

They resolved to head for a New Land to take the gospel to the farther reaches of the world, heading back to England to set sail aboard the Mayflower with 102 passengers, 32 of whom were children, and 30 additional crew. One soul died on the voyage and two infants were born. It was a long trip, but by late November they set foot on the soil of a new land. In a few months, by mid-January, a common house had been built, a village began to take shape, and the Native Americans made friends with them. With the first winter came a great sickness, and half their number died. By Spring they planted seeds and learned about the land from their Native American neighbors. They caught herring and used it as fertilizer for planting corn, pumpkin and beans. They hunted deer, bear and turkey and the children learned to gather berries and nuts. By Fall of 1621, they sat down together, our tradition tells us, Pilgrims and Native Americans together shared a meal.

What led the new Euro-Americans through all that hardship to the first Thanksgiving was little more than a vision based on these kinds of promises of God: *“I will make with them a covenant of peace... so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and they are my people. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God.”*

3) Peter Storey, *With God in the Crucible: Preaching Costly Discipleship*.

Amid all the dismal news and uncertainty of today, if we can hold before us this glorious vision, then, when we go about our daily rounds and put our money on the counter, we will look into the face of our neighbor and say with compassion, “Thank you. Together let us be at peace.”

AMEN.