

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 1:1-8
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2,8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a

December 6, 2020
The Second Sunday of Advent

Today, we light the second candle of Advent. The Peace Candle. I heard one clergy name our observance this week as representing the God who wages peace. I thought...how appropriate that we move into this week with the idea that God is waging peace for us, in and through us. For me the word “wage” connotes an assertive and resilient desire...the ability (in this case) to adamantly bring good into our lives. To wage peace is powerful and so we come to this week knowing that God is fighting for each of us, waging peace deep within his creation so that we may live into wholeness as children God intended us to be.

Last week, as we lit the first candle of Advent we reflected on this one, singular dim light coming into the world, a light that brings a glimmer of hope into our hearts especially when we have been struggling with the shadows.

This week, the light grows. And, maybe our hope is growing along with it. However, as I read our texts this week I found them to be stark reminders that even as our hope grows, as light brightens, we will still find ourselves in times of wilderness, struggling to get out of the shadows. We travel through both hills and valleys. Our readings seem to acknowledge the depth of the journey, a journey that bears our souls open and exposes our greatest vulnerabilities and our unhealed wounds.

I wonder if you find this imagery challenging during Advent...when we are supposed to be increasing in hope, we are presented with a difficult hurdle...the barrenness of the desert...a deep valley. It brings forth images of isolation and possibly despair as we look out over an endless dry landscape, a landscape where our hearts are hurting and we are desperate for God to bring peace, to wage peace.

The prophet Isaiah names the valley directly as he calls out to God, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” The prophet’s is adamant that his people need God and are desperate for God’s help in their time of desperation.

It reminds me that our realization of peace, our ability to live into hope, can be fraught with setbacks. And, in this time of Advent, when we have such high expectations for goodness and love and joy, it can be extremely hard to navigate this time of year when we are indeed bound in the depths of the wilderness right now – COVID being front and center. Yet, as we are communally navigating the valley of COVID, I want to acknowledge that for many of us it is even harder when someone we love is in their own individual valley, their own wilderness.

So, this week, I couldn’t help but think that we deeply need to acknowledge those loved ones, those friends and family members who are going through wilderness moments. Whether they

be addiction or mental illness. Maybe they are battling cancer or going through a life altering divorce or job loss. At this time of year, it can be especially hard to see our loved ones fighting their way through a barren desert. It hurts our souls. We, like Isaiah, call out to God for them...Comfort, O comfort them, God. Wage peace for them. I know from my own personal experience, watching my son battle his own struggle with depression and anxiety, I have called out so many times. God comfort him...lift him out of his desert. God, I can't do this without you and neither can he. I don't have the answers but I am going to trust that you do. And, God, we really need you right now.

The wilderness bears out in raw emotion the human experience of deep pain that we are called to move through. It exposes the things we would rather hide, the challenges we fight to overcome, the circumstances that have brought us low. We watch our loved ones try so hard to believe in God's peace for them and we pray that God will deliver them. We pray that our loved one's will have faith that God is waging peace for them. Please, oh please, believe me when I say you are not alone. I'm sure so many of us have said that at times to someone we love who is hurting.

I am reminded that when we use words like hope and peace, they are not to be lightly thrown around. They are real and true and for some, they can be extremely hard to claim especially in the depths of a valley.

That is why I found Isaiah's words so powerful. The prophet is preaching to his people who have been hurt. They have been traumatized. You might say their soul is aching. Some have surely lost hope in God. And, Isaiah watches them in their pain and his heart breaks. His prayer for those whom he loves is that they be delivered from their circumstances. He pleads for God to speak tenderly to them because they have experienced enough sorrow. Wage peace, God! Wage peace! Please, wage peace.

And, God hears. A voice cries out to Isaiah...Do not worry...I am going to lift up those valleys and bring those mountains down. I am your God and I am with you. So lift up your voice in strength. Do not be afraid because I am going to carry you out of your wilderness. I am going to wage peace for you.

My heart goes out to any of you out there, like me, who have had to stand like Isaiah, calling out to God to deliver our loved ones from pain. For many of us, that kind of prayer is the hardest and most desperate we will ever pray. Comfort, O Comfort our beloveds, God.

The wilderness is so difficult to accept and to walk through. But, we are reminded that God is always walking the journey with us. If anything, the wilderness shows us a wide and broad landscape. A place of possibility. A place of expansive sight. The good, the bad, the joyful, the heartbreaking. It's all there together. And, God reminds us that God is also there.

I want to close this morning with the beautiful prayer that so inspired me this week. It's by the Rev. Laura Stephens-Reed.

God who wages peace,
we often think of your vision for this world too passively,
simply waiting for conflict to end;
too much as a lack of something negative,
merely wanting our circumstances to be different than they are now.
But your peace is active,
urging us to join you in working for it.
Your peace is the living presence of something good,
filling us to the brim with love and delight.
Inspire, embolden, and equip us to pursue this peace.
To say yes to what is good by setting a boundary on what is unhealthy.
To protect spaces for silence and prayer.
To ask hard questions.
To dare to hope, then take holy risks.
To use the gifts you've offered us with confidence and compassion.
To look for ways to partner with others for more impact in your world.
To notice those who are worried or wanting, and to listen to them about how we can best help.
To proclaim your inclusive love unapologetically, even brashly.
To demand justice for all your beloveds.
This is peace.
This is your peace, sent to earth as a surprising bundle of vulnerability.
Peace be with us all as we wait – purposefully – for his birth anew.
Amen.