

2 Advent Yr B, 6/12/2020
Ps 85:1-2, 8-13
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“God’s peace”

Today I am continuing with my attempt to base my sermons this year on the Psalms. So we begin with a little bit of background information to Psalm 85. Psalm 85 has a title, in the NRSV it goes like this: “To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.” Another translation has: “To the choirmaster,” instead of “leader.” In light of this, some biblical scholars consider this psalm a sung liturgy. There are eleven psalms, including this one, that mention in their titles the Korahites as possible authors of these psalms. In addition to our psalm’s title, my NRSV *Lutheran Study Bible* also says it is a: “Prayer for the Restoration of God’s Favor.” The Good News Bible has a similar title: “A Prayer for the Nation’s Welfare.” One biblical scholar also says the type of this psalm is “a national lament,” (see Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Psalms,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, p. 473). However, the lament segment of this psalm consists of vv 3-7, the ones left out of today’s lectionary. Several biblical scholars believe Psalm 85 dates back sometime after the Babylonian exile, when God’s people returned to the promised land.

Turning to the opening two verses, I like the REB’s translation better than the NRSV, it goes like this: “LORD, you have been gracious to your land and turned the tide of Jacob’s fortunes. You have forgiven the guilt of your people and put all their sins away.” I like that word “gracious.” God’s people praise and thank God because his grace even extends to the land. Later in verse 12 there is another reference that: “The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.” Or, as the Good News Bible puts it: “The LORD will make us prosperous, and our land will produce rich harvests.” In other words, God’s grace extends to both God’s people and all of creation—this is especially true for the Jewish people when they are faithful to God, and their faithfulness is possible precisely because God is gracious and faithful to his covenant relationship with them.

After verse two, the Hebrew word *Selah* appears in this psalm. The word *Selah* also appears some 71 times in the Book of Psalms. Biblical scholars, at best, still do not know the exact meaning of this word. They differ in what they think it may mean. Some scholars think it may be a liturgical rubric,

telling worshippers what to do at that particular point in the worship time. Other scholars think it may specifically refer to lifting up one's eyes in reverence; or the lifting up of voices, as in singing louder. Other scholars think it may refer to a gesture of bending or bowing, to humbly kneel down before God. Still other scholars think *Selah* might mean a musical interlude; or observing a time for silent prayer and meditation. Perhaps we'll have to all wait until we get to heaven to find out its true meaning.¹

Continuing now especially with verses 8 and 10, we're given a beautiful picture of how God will come to bring peace/shalom. The psalm looks forward to the time when God: "...will speak peace to his people," and "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Notice that steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace are personified here. Who might these personifications refer to? Well, as Christians, we most likely think of Jesus. He is the perfect example of all four of these attributes. Jesus, in his earthly ministry perfectly demonstrated steadfast love. He was perfectly faithful to God the Father right up to the end of his life. His righteousness was demonstrated in the way that he thought, spoke, worshipped, lived and died. He, as the prophet Isaiah spoke of him, was the Prince of Peace. So this psalm is a very appropriate one for the second Sunday of Advent, since the theme is peace/shalom.

Shalom is a very "loaded word" in the Bible. In biblical times, and even now, among the Jewish people, shalom was and is used as a greeting when people meet and as a departing word as they take leave of one another. In this sense, it is a benediction, a "good news" word, a blessing. However, there is a lot more to the word shalom. It also means well-being/health, and can also refer to healing and wholeness. Shalom also, as in our psalm, can refer to material prosperity, as well as the well-being and productivity of the land to produce a high yield of food. Shalom can also refer to God's gracious activity for all of creation to bring about a perfect harmony and unity, as in our hope for the future new heaven and new earth. This idea, I think, is related to a quote attributed to Albert Schweitzer, which goes something like this: "Until [we] extend [our] circle of compassion to include

¹ See James Howell, "Commentary on Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13," at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-psalm-851-2-8-13-3>.

all living beings, [human beings] will not [themselves] find peace.” Peace as GOD’s GIFT will make such a perfect existence possible.

That beautiful picture our psalm gives us of righteousness and peace kissing each other reminds me of the following story.

[Rev. Dr. Lois Wilson recalls]: During my last visit to China, I told my friend Liu (Lujian) about T.Z. Koo, an [Student Christian Movement] visitor from China to Winnipeg during my student days. Liu confirmed what T.Z. had told me so many years before: that in the Mandarin language, the printed characters for peace may be translated literally as “rice in the mouth” and “a roof over your head.” But then, after much deep thought, Liu ventured hesitantly and with a tender smile, “There is a third meaning to the Chinese character for peace—two hearts beating together in understanding, friendship, harmony, and love.”² “Two hearts beating together in understanding, friendship, harmony, and love.” In short, God’s gift of peace extends to everyone having enough of the basic necessities of life and living in right, reconciled relationships with one another, with the whole creation, and with God.

That, I think, is what God is up to in this psalm for his chosen people as they returned back home from their Babylonian exile; that too is what God is up to in your life and mine; and that reminds me of another wonderful story of how God’s gift of peace takes shape in the world and in the church.

During the November, 1940, World War II blitz in England, Coventry Cathedral was destroyed. Workmen picking through the rubble found a large number of nails from the Middle Ages. The nails were gathered up, fashioned into crosses and plated with silver. One cross of nails was set up on an altar in the ruins of the old cathedral. Behind it is a large, charred cross, and inscribed on the wall behind that are the words, “Father, forgive.”

Many little crosses made of those nails have since been sent to churches in other countries that had been engaged in World War II. Thousands upon thousands of picture postcards depicting the Coventry Cross of Nails and the words “Father, forgive” have been distributed all over the world.

² Lois Wilson, *Turning the World Upside Down: a memoir* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1989), p. 200.

The Coventry Cross of Nails has become for many a symbol of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.³

During this season of Advent, as we prepare for the coming of Jesus; may the gift of God's peace inspire and motivate us to respond with acts of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Amen.

³ Wm. J. Bausch, *A World Of Stories for Preachers and Teachers and all who love stories that move and challenge* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, Eighth Printing, 2007), p. 349.