

Practice

December 4, 2022

Practice

There's an old joke that someone walks up to a stranger on the streets of New York and asks, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" When the stranger earnestly starts to give directions, they're interrupted by someone interjecting, "Practice!"

As tired as this joke may be, it's been swirling around my head all week as I've been contemplating both of our scripture readings this week, as well as the theme of our second week of Advent: Peace.

- How do we get to the "peaceable kingdom," as our passage from Isaiah is often called? Practice.
- How do we live the baptism of repentance John the Baptist was preaching? Practice.
- How do we co-conspire with God in the bringing about the reign of peace? Practice.

Practice is really what Advent is. Indeed, practice is what a Christian life is. It's spending time over and over and over again, committing oneself to living in Christ's ways, so that not only our very beings become Christ shaped, but the world is infused with those ways by us as well.

Isaiah

The second half of the passage we heard from Isaiah today has inspired numerous pieces of art, from paintings to music. It offers us a compelling image: in God's vision, when things are working the way they should, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the lion will eat straw like the ox, and people will not hurt or destroy one another nor creation, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD.

Every year, when I get Christmas cards depicting this scene, I'm thrilled, as folks choose to put this image out into the world. I'm thrilled because the senders are lifting up the idea that predatory behavior and domination have no place in a Godly ecosystem. The image of the wolf and lamb coexisting in peace and the child playing within reach of poisonous snakes in God's realm, is meant to tell us that the ways that we hurt and destroy and devour one another, even the ways that seem so ingrained in us that they seem predetermined or inevitable, are not what God wants for us.

At the risk of being cliché, God wants us to coexist. As interesting as this image is of what we have come to understand as natural enemies coexisting in harmony, the first half of this passage is just as compelling, even if it doesn't stick with us because it's not as visually compelling. We're told of a realm ruled by wisdom and understanding and righteousness, rather than shortsightedness, misperceiving, and dishonesty.

Advent

As I was praying about how we might put this into practice, a conversation I had with a church member a while back came to mind. This person had made an appointment to see me. As it turns out, there were a few things that had been troubling them in worship and our church life of late. I

could tell from the moment they sat down that there was a lot of energy in this meeting, and that what they were bringing to me was important to them. Let's face it, you don't make an appointment to see someone to say I like the way they've been doing their hair. It takes both courage and commitment to make an appointment.

Now, in the early days of my ministry, I would have immediately been defensive, thinking, "they're criticizing me. I need to demonstrate my superior knowledge. My role as an authority figure is at stake." And let's not even talk about ego; what this really means is they don't like me.

But decades of working to steep myself in not only studying the scriptures but also trying to put God's ways into practice have led me to a much different attitude. Instead of getting defensive, instead of trying to prove myself, I tried to listen. Listen not only to what was being said but how and why. To one of the things that had concerned this person, I explained what I understood to be a deep pastoral reason for continuing the practice. In engaging another of the things they brought up, we had a healthy dialogue. And in yet another instance, I found their knowledge and wisdom so compelling that I thanked them for helping me and my ministry to be better through their work and insight.

We ended our meeting with a deeper mutual respect and a stronger foundation. We ended our meeting in peace, not the detente of rivals who will meet another day, but truly at peace, both having grown for the experience.

I bring this up today as the church invites us to focus on Peace this second week of Advent because I think that the substantial barrier to peace, both personally and societally, is defensiveness and how it plays itself out as power and control in our relationships. I could have put my guard up, but instead, I actively chose not to. And our reward was growth, understanding, and peace. Furthermore, I applaud the individual for having the spiritual maturity to come to talk with me, rather than letting their frustration fester and build, or even worse, walking away.

A small side note: This does not mean that I'm looking for each of you to fill my calendar with complaints. Rather, I share this as a very real, personal, vulnerable example of how putting Godly behaviors into practice creates very different outcomes.

When the church invites us into focusing on peace as we prepare for the coming of our savior, it's not the peace of an idyllic snowfall. We're talking about the hard won peace of changed behaviors and perspectives. This is a two-way street, to be sure. Just as we need to work on not being defensive and controlling, so too, we need to create relationships in which correction and critique will be received in a spirit of mutual respect.

One of the ways that I knew that Scott's and my relationship would be one of peace was in the fact that he's the only person I've ever driven with whose corrections I don't mind. Somehow, when he tells me to slow down or move over or reminds me of an exit, it doesn't feel controlling or judgmental. His comments don't carry the energy of "you're wrong," but rather have a mutuality of "let's do this well together."

Godly peace doesn't fall into our laps. To quote RuPaul, "You better work!" Looking back at our Isaiah passage, we build a world of peace when wisdom and understanding and righteousness are our tools, rather than shortsightedness, misperceiving, and dishonesty.

Gospel

And that brings us to our Gospel today. We read the story of John the Baptist two or three times a year in worship, so the gist of the story probably isn't new to most of you. This year, though, we read the version from the Gospel of Matthew. What strikes me this time around is John's critique of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were coming out into the desert to be baptized, but whereas the crowds were listening to John's message of repentance, John accuses the Pharisees and Sadducees of seeking baptism in order to flee from the wrath of God. Basically, John is criticizing these folks who want the reward of Baptism without acknowledging their sin and resolving to live an ethical life.

The word translated as "repentance" here is "metanoia," which more literally means, "change of heart." John "called for a return to righteousness, to lives of integrity, to relationships rooted in honesty and respect. He spoke against presumption and arrogant reliance on one's (privilege), against complacency and the shirking of responsibility, against disinterest in the welfare of others." (Bergant)

Conclusion

I'm asked often how there can be so much ugliness and meanness in the world if the Messiah, the Christ, has already been born. My answer is that, while the historical Jesus may have been born 2000+ years ago in Bethlehem, the Christ Spirit is still looking to be born in our lives today.

We started out with that joke, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall," even though it's corny as all get out, because it's so applicable. We will get to peace through practice, and those practices aren't lightning bolts. Rather, the practices of the reign of God are openness and mutuality and compassion and modesty, not in the sense of being chaste or morally pure, but in the sense of being humble.

Friends, my prayer this week is for metanoia for all of us, that is, a change of heart. That by employing God's ways of respect and understanding and righteousness, rather than defensiveness and domination and appealing to our privilege, the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, will ripple out from our lives into this world that God loves so much.

*Preaching the New Lectionary: Year A, Dianne Bergant.

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