

## **The Inn: A Place At The Table** **Baruch 5:1-5; Philippians 1:9-11**

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Once again, this week, we were shocked and heartbroken by news of another school shooting - this time much closer to home. Many of us know people who live in Oxford, just forty five miles away. Some even know students at the high school. So, when we learned that a fifteen-year-old sophomore allegedly shot and killed four students and shot and injured another seven including a teacher, it seemed somehow a little more real but no less devastating than all of the school shootings that have come before.

We are, again, left with so many unanswered questions. How can this happen? Why did he do it? How can we stop these horrible shootings once and for all? What is wrong in our country that this should happen over and over and over again? At a time when we are already feeling weary from the global pandemic, the shooting in Oxford adds to our sense of dis-ease, grief, and despair.

So, it feels somehow strange and also fitting that on this second Sunday in Advent we gather together, as we do each year, to speak of peace. We light the candle of peace, we sing of peace, our scripture readings point to God's promise of peace. Yet, many of us are feeling far from peaceful today as the images of terrified teenagers continue to flash through our minds and on our computer screens. Is there a place for the peace of God in our lives and our world today?

This is the second in our sermon series titled *The Inn: Housing the Holy*. Last week, we focused on hope and making room in our hearts for the coming of Christ. This week, we shift to peace and how we can work toward peace by setting a place for everyone at God's table.

Before I go any farther with that, though, a word about one of our scripture readings for today. You may have noticed that one of our readings comes from the Book of Baruch and thought, "Book of Baruch? I've never heard of that before!" And that would be a completely understandable response. The book of Baruch is not in the Bible we, as Protestants, typically use. (A decision made early on in the Protestant Reformation because Baruch, along with several other books, was not in the Hebrew Bible). However, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, those books were included. That version is what is typically used by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. As Protestants, we have placed Baruch, along with several other books, into what we call the Apocrypha.

Baruch himself was a scribe and friend to Jeremiah, who wrote a few years after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The writing in Baruch is especially beautiful and poetic, and this may be why, though it isn't part of Protestant bibles, this particular reading appears in the revised common lectionary readings for the second Sunday in Advent.

Like Jeremiah, Baruch is addressing the people of Israel and Judah in exile. They are scattered across the Babylonian Empire, lost and uprooted and homeless. Baruch speaks God's words to them - words of hope and promise. Imagine the joy of hearing these words for a people who have been separated from each other and from their homeland by a foreign empire!

*Take off your mourning clothes  
and oppression, Jerusalem!  
Dress yourself in the dignity  
of God's glory forever.  
Wrap the justice that comes from God around yourself like a robe.  
God will give you this name  
by which to be called forever:  
The Peace That Comes from Justice,  
The Honor That Comes  
from Reverence for God!*

In older versions of the Bible, Jerusalem's new name is Righteous Peace, God's Glory. So, what is this "righteous peace", "the peace that comes from justice"? If you look up the word peace in Merriam-Webster or some other contemporary dictionary, you will typically see two sorts of definitions. One is related to rest - something like "a state of calm or tranquility". The other describes the absence of conflict or war. Yet, in scripture, peace has a slightly different meaning. In Hebrew, the word is *shalom*, and it translates to something like wholeness, completeness, or well-being. In New Testament Greek, the word is *eirene*, which suggests unity or bringing together parts to make a whole.

And so, when we speak of God's peace, when we share the peace of Christ with each other, we are speaking of the peace that comes from wholeness - wholeness within ourselves and wholeness in the world. That is why peace is almost always linked with justice in the Bible. We cannot have wholeness in the world without justice. Without righting oppression, inequity, and misuse of power. Without everyone having a place at the table.

The other nuance of meaning is that both peace and justice require our active participation - the work of our hearts and our hands to build the kingdom of God.

Some of that is inner work as we struggle with our own self-worth and value. We question whether we deserve to sit at God's table, whether we've been forgiven for whatever wrongs are in the past, whether we are "Christian" enough. Let me assure you that as you come to God's table today, as you take the bread and the cup and remember all that Jesus has done for us, you are worthy because you are a beloved child of God, loved as you are. No one is excluded from God's table because there is no limit to God's grace. So rest assured, there is a place for you here. There is peace for you here.

We also have inner work to do to, as Paul says to the Philippians, grow in love that is more and more rich in knowledge and insight so that we can decide what really matters in our lives, our church, and our world.

Finally, we are called to the work of peace and justice. As preacher Jon Berquist has said, "Our justice comes from what (happens when) we get down on our knees and (work) with God together in the dirt in the mess of human life. When we are planning justice together with those who are just throwing off their oppression, we have the opportunity for peace. Peace is something we plant together and build together."

That work has long been part of our church's identity, and we have been building on that legacy over the last couple of years. Last fall, I preached a sermon series called *Building a Bigger Table*. I challenged us to look at our church community and consider who isn't here and what we can do to be more welcoming to a greater diversity of people - especially those who may feel excluded. We have made a lot of progress expanding our table, particularly with our new church statement. We are actively working toward healing and wholeness - the wholeness which brings peace.

In the new year, we'll be focusing on making space for people who are struggling emotionally and spiritually right now. Our first sermon series is titled "Care of the Soul" and will be about some of the questions and challenges many of us are facing in heart and spirit right now. At the same time, we'll be starting up covenant groups, small groups where people can care for one another and ask the old Wesleyan question, "How goes it with your soul?" We'll also be continuing our anti-racism and LGBTQ inclusion work. And we will continue to look at our community and ask, "Who isn't here who might be in need of God's love?" "How will our church family come to represent the whole of God's people?"

Of course, the work doesn't end with expanding the table, making our community more diverse, but is also about inclusion, making sure that the contributions, presence, and perspectives of different groups of people are valued and integrated into our church life together.

Ultimately, we cannot have justice in our world without peace nor peace in our world without justice. Our inner peace comes from knowing that God is with us and we are living lives of love aligned with God; peace in the world comes when every child of God has a place at the table.

The reasons why a fifteen-year-old walked out of the bathroom Tuesday afternoon and started shooting his peers are no doubt complex with factors at play that we may never understand. We can't fix that particular situation or directly address its cause. Yet, if you are feeling hopeless in the aftermath, if despair and grief are hovering in your heart, first seek out the comfort of our good and loving God and then ask of yourself, of God, of your community how you might promote peace and wholeness around you. How you might create another place at the table.

May it be so. Amen.