

“Come...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, December 1, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
In days to **come** the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the
highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills;
All the nations shall stream to it.
Many people will **come** and say, ‘**Come**, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from
Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any
more.
O house of Jacob, **come**, let us walk in the light of the Lord! Isaiah 2:1-5

Will you pray with me. God of the unseen and unexpected, you sent prophets to speak on your behalf long ago. Too often we hear their words as predictions of the future rather than proclamations of your presence among us now. Teach us yet again how to live in the here and now, O God, and to listen to the prophets’ words with new openness to their meaning for us in these first days of Advent. Amen.

Well, our theme on this first Sunday of Advent is peace. Such a simple five-letter word, isn’t it? It sounds so... nice...

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says to his disciples...

“Let there be peace on earth,” we’ll sing as our closing hymn today.

Peace flags, peace marches, “peace in the valley” from a Christian song written in 1937 for Mahalia Jackson to sing. It was then sung by Red Foley, Elvis Presley, Connie Francis, Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Ronnie Milsap, and others all the way up to Faith Hill¹!

Resting at peace, peace of mind, peace and... quiet.... “If I could just get some peace and quiet around here!”

We hear the word so often it loses its punch... its power... its relevance in our world torn up again and again and again by war, violence, prejudice, hatred and ignorance. Yet, once again, we’re called to think about peace as a theme of Advent. We’re preparing to celebrate the birth of “the prince of peace.” Why? Why do we do this every year, when peace seems such an elusive, gauzy, unobtainable state of being? Why not just skip it, since it seems so naïve to think we’ll ever get to a state of worldwide peace? Why think about peace? (get responses)

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_in_the_Valley

I think we can't skip thinking about peace because of one verb: "come." In our passage from First Isaiah today, written almost 3,000 years ago – which just boggles my mind every time I think about it! – the verb "come" appears four times. In *five* verses "come" appears four times:

"In days to **come** the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains..." (Is 2:2)

"Many peoples shall **come** and say, '**Come**, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob..." (Is 2:3)

"O house of Jacob, **come**, let us walk in the light of the Lord." (Is 2:5)

Get this... IT'S AN INVITATION! COME! Come to the Lord's house, wherever it is. Come with lots of people. Come and let's walk up to the holy mountain *together*. Come and let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Why do we have such a hard time with this? Why don't we want to get with the program and accept the invitation to come and sit together in peace? O.K., I know we pretty much do that right here – for the most part – in Thomaston, in this church. We're a pretty agreeable bunch, even with all our various backgrounds and differences. We like to come together... for worship, for a coffee/happy hour, for a Fall Festival and a community dinner.

But beyond us... why is coming together peacefully such a hard thing to do? For 3,000 years, the invitation from God to come and sit together has been a vital part of the ministry and focus of every major world religion? Why is it hard to do – come together in peace? (get responses)

I don't really have my own answer to this question. I was looking for yours! But I wonder if it has something to do with where we find meaning – in our daily lives, in our worship practices, in our concern, or lack of concern, for others? Maybe the question we need to ask ourselves, and others, is not, "Do I, or do you, believe in God?", but this, "Where do I, or do you, find meaning?"

It is often at the time of someone's death that we find meaning in life. It's often after someone has died that I say, "Gee, I wish I'd known those things about them before they died. They were filled with such meaning and I missed a lot of it!" I wrote about that in one of my Fall meditations recently.

I participated in the Buddhist memorial service for my dear friend, Margaret Barragato, in Oakland, Maine six years ago. Margaret was a Zen Buddhist priest, along with her husband, Stef. Margaret's memorial service was very, very different from any memorial service we would have here. I won't go into all the details, but we were invited by Peter Wohl, the Zen Buddhist priest, who succeeded Margaret as the priest of their sangha, to participate as we wished – with full bowing all the way to the floor three times in succession at numerous points in the service, with greeting one another with the Buddhist practice of folded hands and a small bow, with chanting, with putting incense to our foreheads singly and then placing it in a burning dish of incense on the alter next to Margaret's place of sitting in the zendo. Then there was a time of sitting, in silence. I don't know how long it was.

As this service began, I thought I would simply watch and respect the actions of others, but not really participate myself... as I'm not a Buddhist... I thought. But as the service went on, *I began to find meaning in the rituals*, so foreign to me personally, but suddenly, or gradually seeming to hold meaning beyond anything I could have imagined. I left that service, having honored Margaret in the ways she would most have liked us to do, and feeling that I had worshiped. I had worshiped in a way I didn't think I could. I left "at peace" with Margaret's death, at peace with myself, and at peace in the midst of finding meaning in a holy service of worship very foreign to my personal experience.

Finding meaning... Perhaps that's the truest invitation we receive from God, from the Scriptures...

And yet, here and now at the beginning of Advent, and the secular holiday season, do we find meaning? OR do we hear the words so often, repeat the Christmas carols year after year, remember the Advent themes of peace, hope, joy and love with our Advent wreath and its candle lighting each week, year after year, so that pretty soon we're saying under our breaths, or at least in our heads, "Yada, yada, yada," or "Yeah right, whadja get me for Christmas?"

Let's try not to do that this year. Let's find meaning in the season that goes beyond the jingles, and the hype to buy, buy, buy.

Come, find meaning here.

Come, find out what it means to do whatever we can to discover peace and quiet... not just for ourselves individually, but all of us together, no matter our religious tradition or none... no matter anything beyond the fact that we are all children of God, all invited guests to the banquet of life God would have us enjoy together.

Come, and find... Come, and be found...

Let the people say, "Amen."