

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Isaiah 57:14-58:7

"Peace, Peace"

We heard in Isaiah 55 the LORD's invitation to all people to "come, you who are thirsty" – and how he promised to provide water, milk, wine to anyone who knew their needs and would listen to him. High above us as he is, he promised to send down his word to refresh and to guide his people – just as the rain and snow fall from above. Now the LORD adds another promise: that he will " *dwell with his people;*" though he lives in the "high and holy place" he will also come and dwell with "the contrite and the lowly in spirit." This is, of course, the promise of Advent: that the Lord comes to live among us, that the Word becomes human and dwells with his people.

1) *Peace To All*

So when he comes, he brings grace and forgiveness to the contrite; he "will not accuse forever, nor will he always be angry." "I know your ways," says the LORD, *but* "I will heal you..."

God's promises through Isaiah are addressed to "all nations," Jews and Gentiles alike, but they will find a home in the hearts of only certain people. Who are they? Isaiah 57:15 is one of the key verses of the whole Old Testament: the LORD says: "I live in the high and holy place, but also *with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.*" Jesus reaffirmed the same promise: "Blessed are the poor in

spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3).

Who are these people? What does it mean to be *contrite*? Its basic meaning is to be broken, to be "*ground down.*" It's an image of dust, or powder that has been produced by pressure, by grinding. It is almost always coupled with expressions like "broken-hearted," "faint-hearted." It speaks of people who have been discouraged, exhausted, made despondent. What has made them so is evil in the world, in other people, and in themselves. They are weighed down with sadness, with regret, and with guilt.

We tend, I think, to imagine the contrite as those who are penitents, who are remorseful, confessing their sins, actively seeking forgiveness. In the history of the Church, "contrition" was often the required basis for the sacrament of Confession – "if you are contrite, and determined not to sin again, you will be forgiven." But Biblically speaking, being contrite speaks even more of the sense of being crushed, of being ground down to fine powder until we are "faint-hearted," or even "broken-hearted." So it speaks more of an inner condition than of active repentance: of knowing we are so ground down that we cannot help ourselves, that we cannot turn one way or another, that we cannot even summon the energy to turn from sin and repent.

I suspect that describes more people in churches than we might imagine. Too many people are “ground down” by the pressures of life – of family, of finances, of ill health, of anxiety, of fear. Common to all of these is the sad inner knowledge that we contribute to our own troubles; and so we feel guilt as well as anger, shame as well as exhaustion from “trying to make things better.” There is, in other words, at times little peace in our souls and little joy in our lives.

The good news of Advent is that Jesus came to dwell among people just like us. I don’t imagine Mary or Joseph or any of Jesus’ family and friends were living “on top of the world.” They were poor, scraping a living, trying to get by with their faith in God and their fear of Rome. And every believer from that century to this has been deeply thankful that Jesus comes to people who are “ground down.” So don’t be afraid to tell him the truth; be honest in your prayers; say “Come, Lord, and help me and forgive me and restore me and strengthen me – not because I deserve it; not because I am a true and worthy penitent; but because of your mercy and grace; because of Jesus. Grant me your peace.”

2) A Question

God promises healing and peace to broken-hearted people, but then a question arises among them. “Why,” they ask the LORD, “have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?” People who are contrite, who are humble, who are penitent, who are even fasting, ask why God is not taking more notice of them. Why? That question rings more bells, I suspect, than we are comfortable with! “Why, O Lord?” we ask; “we have called and called and you have not answered.” What is wrong? How long can “peace, peace” last if we suspect that God is not listening to us?

The answers God gives through Isaiah are very uncomfortable ones. His people “*seem* like a people who are eager to know my ways” says the LORD; “they act as though they were a nation that does what is right.” But something is wrong. Some are still avidly pursuing their own pleasures. Other individual Israelites may be “bowing their heads” and even living “in sackcloth and ashes,” but God is not taking notice because Israel as a society has no concern for social justice; no concern for the enslaved, the oppressed, the poor; no concern for the needy, the hungry, the naked, the homeless. Read any of the Old Testament prophets from Amos onward and you will hear this theme over and over. Israel will be punished and sent into exile because as a supposedly godly society she does not care for her needy; instead the rich and the powerful exploit the poor and the helpless.

That is not the sort of news we like to hear. As American Christians who prize our individuality, we proclaim that what our society needs is for more people to get right with God; to repent, to find forgiveness in Jesus Christ, to have their hearts made new by the Spirit of God. That will solve everything! What we rarely say is that we are called as Christians into the communal life of the church, and that we are called as churches to work for the good of society. Faith is not all about “you or me and God;” it is about “us.” The way the LORD says it through Isaiah is “*do not turn away from your own flesh and blood*” – which every commentator will tell you means not just showing concern for your own family, but showing concern for all human beings who are made, as we are, in the image of God.

So Isaiah’s vision of God’s new start for Israel after the Exile, after their “sins have been paid for,” is for an open, just, egalitarian society where the aliens, the

foreigners, the slaves, the handicapped, people missing limbs or other body parts, the chronically diseased - all the people who had been excluded from "the congregation of Israel" and from worship in Temple or synagogue; are now to be welcomed in as full members of the new Jewish society, and the Temple will become "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56).

So if in our day we sense at times that God is not listening, maybe we should hear what he said to Israel and ask if we are neglecting part of our calling. You know, for example, that the need for food - even here on Long Island - is enormous. Long Island Cares and Island Harvest distributed 12 million pounds of food this year. Food pantries and soup kitchens cannot keep up with the rising demands - in fact most of them report that they have *less food* available than in past years to deal with more people. The need here for affordable housing is acute: rents are out of sight compared to income; the median home on the Island sells for \$450,000. To afford that you are supposed to have a family income of \$180,000; guess why so many homeowners are in trouble! It's said that 20% of young people aged 20-34 left the Island in the last decade. But too many people just want to "close the doors behind them;" and insist on no more housing - especially "affordable housing" - in my back yard!

At a national level, it's alarming to see how divisive an issue immigration is becoming. Whatever your views are on how we should solve the major problems that we have allowed to develop, the xenophobia that is emerging is going to cause our nation great woes if it continues unchecked. Many Christians do not like to talk about social issues like poverty, housing, hunger - to evangelicals in particular, this sounds like a "liberal social agenda." But I can assure you that hunger and homelessness make no

distinction between Republicans and Democrats, believers and unbelievers. If you think they can't happen to you, or that they only happen to "lazy people" (as one e-mail I was sent this week affirmed), then you have not recently faced the realities of the Long Island job market, or taken on a variable-rate mortgage in the past decade, or tried to rent an apartment.

"Do not turn away from your own flesh and blood," says the LORD. If you do, don't be surprised if he seems not to listen to your prayers or notice your fasting.

3) *Restoration*

But if, says the LORD, you will expend your time and money and love and concern on people in need, "then your light will break forth like the dawn; your healing will quickly appear. When you call, and I will answer... I will say, 'Here am I'."

If we will be humble and contrite; if we will care for and serve the poor and needy; if we will reverence the Lord's Sabbath and worship him with our whole hearts, then - says the LORD - "you will rebuild the ancient ruins." You will be like the Jews returning from Exile who were privileged to rebuild the Temple. You will be called "Repairer of Broken Walls" and "Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." Your work will make a difference to your community, your society. People will again be able to live with good shelter, enough food, and adequate clothes. The crumbling fabric of your society will be restored by people like you who believe and who care.

And the LORD says you will become - in a dry and thirsty land - "like a well-watered garden" and like "a spring whose waters never fail." It's just as Jesus said: "Come and drink, and you will never thirst again, and you yourself will become a spring of living

water bubbling up for the blessing of others." Then you will find peace, then you will find joy.

You and I need that this Christmas. At times we feel like dust that has been ground down - *contritus* it was called in Latin; at times we feel that the peace God offered us has evaporated. At times we are so preoccupied with our own needs that we hardly notice the very real and very much larger needs of people around us. At times we want God to notice our piety and are confused that he seems deaf to our prayers.

We all need the promise of Advent, that the Lord will come and dwell with his people - with those who are humble and "faint of heart," and who care for the needy - and give us peace.

Let us pray...