

Year B Advent 2  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
2 Peter 3:8-15a  
Mark 1:1-8  
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This week it was brought to my attention that there are some churches who will not be lighting the Advent candle for this Sunday- the candle of Peace- because of the war going on in Israel. Our hearts grieve over the war in the Holy Land and all those who are suffering in that terrible conflict, and we need to be holding them all in our prayers daily. So we light this candle as a reminder, a call, to pray for peace. The Advent candles are not a statement of what is the present reality in the world. They are a reminder of the promises of God in Jesus Christ and the qualities of God's Kingdom that will someday be fully manifest on earth in the second coming of Christ when the whole of creation will be restored to reflect the glory and character of God. Only when God's Kingdom is fully established on earth will there truly be peace on earth. We light the candle of peace because we pray for God to bring peace. We know Christ will establish the Kingdom of God in this world in the second coming, but we also pray that His redeeming work through his first coming will bring hope, peace, joy, and love in this world now. This is the difference Christ makes in our world- not what we see in the world without him. We have lit the candle of Peace because we are saying, "Come Lord Jesus, come and bring peace to our warring world. Come and bring peace where there is no peace in the hearts and lives of all people."

There are many kinds of warfare that do not involve nations fighting nations. The peace Christ brings begins in our hearts, In

the way we see and treat others regardless of our relationship to them, in the way we see ourselves and navigate our circumstances, and in our relationship with God. Our faith calls us to trust God when we are living in stressful circumstances of any kind and to allow the Lord to guide and direct us and give us that peace that passes understanding. Our faith also teaches us about how we are meant to be interacting with other people. Our Wednesday morning Bible study groups are currently studying Ephesians chapter 6 where Paul talks about the unseen enemy who is the one who truly takes away our peace and seeks to put us at enmity with God and with one another. In other words, rather than seeing the spouse, or friend, or coworker who you believe has slighted you, as the enemy of the moment, recognize that it is the true enemy who has been ultimately defeated by Jesus Christ on the cross who is working to divide us and destroy us from within. If we can see one another as fellow sojourners with Christ who are still learning to love the Lord and love others in His name, we might treat others with more patience and unconditional love and be slower to assume an intentional act of malice. If we can see those who have yet to embrace God's grace as those to whom we are responsible for bearing witness to the love and grace of God, we might recognize the burden is on us to be gracious and kind. Even in the face of blatant malice. If we can look past the evil that has taken hold of the person and see the wounded hurting soul within,

meeting hatred and venom with the love of Christ, the outcome of that equation is a very different one. So often what we lack is wisdom, and understanding of the root cause of whatever it is we are facing. But God knows what we don't know, and God understands what is beyond our understanding. And God has the power to bring intervention, healing, and peace where there is no peace. It is God's job to bring retribution, not ours.

Having children has been an incredibly great blessing in our lives but it has also tested our ability to live in that state of peace that passes understanding. I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit I have often failed. I can remember as a new mother holding my newborn son who was crying unconsolably. I was doing everything I could think of to console him to no avail. To say that I lacked peace in that moment was an understatement in so many ways. It broke my heart that my beloved child was suffering, and I felt so powerless to do anything about it. The blanket term I was given for his distress as a baby was that he was colicky. It seemed to be the worst in the evening when we were tired and were trying to sit down to dinner after a long day. There were times that I was beside myself with frustration. I loved this child with a love stronger than anything I had ever known. What I lacked was understanding. We learned later that his adenoids and tonsils were so large they were often blocking his airway and no doubt causing him great distress. But as an infant it was simply written off by those we went to for help, as colic- an umbrella term for, "We really have no idea what the problem is but hopefully he will grow out of it." I'd like to say that our troubles were over once he had surgery, and his airways were no longer blocked. But the challenges of parenting a

child and the unconditional love and patience required only increased over the years as our children grew and the challenges of parenting just took on different forms. Learning to balance discipline and compassionate understanding is especially difficult when a child is struggling with attention deficit disorder or other illnesses. Each stage of development for each child came with its own set of challenges that seemed to require a degree in child development which I lacked, all the while accompanied by the stresses of life coming from the world, our jobs or other relationships. The addition of fully formed vocabularies made no impact on reducing my need for divine wisdom and understanding. Now that my children are adults living independently, I continue to seek the Lord's help in teaching me how to parent with love and understanding, and to balance providing support with respecting their independence. Don't get me wrong, in spite of the challenges, they are all a great joy and blessing to me to the extent that I get depressed for a day or two when they leave. Often it is what you most value that has the greatest potential to cause you distress.

Over the years, it was often in those times of the least peaceful circumstances- when we were struggling to find enough time to meet all of life's demands making life feel chaotic, when finances were tight or we were facing one challenge or another with the children, that the Lord would break through the chaos with that peace that passes understanding that could be overwhelming in its power. It would come with an awareness of God's presence and an overwhelming gratitude for God's blessings. Often it would come in those stolen moments of quiet when I would slow

down to listen and reflect- when others in the house were asleep or when I was able to get those moments alone with the Lord, when I would have a sense of His comforting, reassuring presence within. In spite of the challenges, I knew it was a precious time.

Peace begins in our own hearts. For us to have peace in our relationships, in our circumstances, or even in a warring world, we must have peace within. We cannot control what comes at us or is going on around us, but we can change what we take in, how we receive what is said or done, and how we respond. We can guard our hearts and minds from being overtaken by fear or anxiety. We can rest in the Lord regardless of our circumstances.

Our reading from Isaiah in chapter 40 follows a prophetic word of judgment and doom for God's people. But the word of judgment is followed by three voices of comfort speaking not only to the nation of Israel but to the whole world, so that the comfort and consolation is more abundant than the judgment. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." The last phrase of this is often misunderstood. This does **not** mean that the wrath of God has been poured out over Israel twice as severely as she deserves even though in English it sounds that way. The word double means duplicate not twice as much. When a bill was paid in full, the invoice was folded over and pinned to the door of the one who owed the debt. The doubling over of the paper symbolized the payment being equal to the debt that was owed. It was a release of the debt. Think of the version of the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we

forgive our debtors." What Isaiah is saying is that the Lord has paid the debt in full. She has received from the Lord's hand double, the duplicate, for all her sins. Her sins have been paid for. She is free from the burden of the debt owed to the Lord. The Lord has taken care of the sin that would separate us from God. The building of the highway was the assurance of the arrival of the Lord. There would be no obstacles because the way has been cleared. Sin has been paid for and the road is paved. The coming chapters of Isaiah where he tells of the one to come, the suffering servant who will suffer on our behalf goes into detail on how the Lord will accomplish this for us.

We have the promise of the peace that is to come and the peace that can now rule in our hearts, not because we are able in and of ourselves; but because God is able. We have received from the Lord's hand double for all our sins. Because He has paid the price for us in Jesus Christ, we can repent of our sins with the knowledge that we will receive forgiveness. It has already been assured. The peace that passes understanding is not our peace, it's the peace of God that has been given to us as a gift, as a result of His first coming; and a foretaste of what is to come when Christ comes again.  
Amen