

ADVENT 2 2009: CREATE CHRISTMAS SERIES #2

Mark 1:1-8

CREATE PEACE

Sixty-eight years ago -- on the first Sunday in December, the second Sunday of Advent -- many of our parents and grandparents were sitting in churches like this one...

(some of you may have even been here at Divine Street church).

It would not be until later in the afternoon -- as they were perhaps listening Christmas music on the radio -- that announcers would break into the programming to report that an American military base -- in a place then unfamiliar to many in the U.S. -- named Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese.

Radio announcement played.

The folks who had attended church services earlier that day, probably sang "*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*" -- like we will at the end of our service today. The hymn is traditionally sung on the 2nd Sunday of Advent.

And although we usually sing only the first four of the seven verses of the hymn -- the last one is poignantly appropriate for this day:

*O come, Desire of nations bind
all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life;
deliver us from earthly strife.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Is-ra-el!*

The first Sunday of Advent had us thinking about Hope:

-- how to anticipate it...

-- how to help create it, or at least, create the environment through which the Holy Spirit could create hope in our lives and the lives of others.

The second Sunday of Advent brings us to Peace.

It is surprising that the Gospel of Mark -- the earliest account of Jesus -- begins not with a sweet story of the "little town of Bethlehem", shepherds, angels, cattle and sheep, and wise men bearing

gold, frankincense, and myrrh --

-- but with the words of the ancient prophet Isaiah

-- and those of a man named John who was baptizing people.

John the Baptist -- as we've come to know him -- lived in the wilderness, wore clothes made from camel hair, and maintained a diet of sweetened insects. And he went about the Judean countryside proclaiming the Word of the Lord.

It was the same region -- and they were the same Word from the Lord -- from which the prophet Isaiah had preached 500 years earlier.

The prophet said:

*"In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

Isaiah 40:3-5

Now, we hear those words as people of faith. People who have heard those words from *O Come, O Come Emmanuel:*

Deliver us from earthly strife...

...And we wonder, "what in the world is going on with us?"

It seems we continually -- every few years -- enter into new conflicts, and designate new enemies. In fact, former enemies become friends, and former friends become enemies.

And then, we hear these words from Isaiah and John the Baptist on the Sunday we're suppose to think about peace...

...How are we supposed to put these things together?

Well, the voice that is crying out in the wilderness is John's. And John's voice calls to the uncomfortable, rough places of conflict in our lives. John is the one who calls us to make things smooth. The one who tells us there are some bumpy places that need to be taken care of --in our lives. John is the one who says to us there is One coming after him. And that even though he baptized people with water to symbolize the change they wanted to make in their lives....

...he was insistent that the long-awaited Messiah was the one who was going to give them the power to actually live into those changes.

So, on this second Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that we are to get ready -- there is work to be done in order to see the Lord. Because we will not see the glory of the Lord, or experience the power of the Lord -- unless we make the way smooth.

One of the things we do when we come to this season before Christmas is we make lists. On our "to-do" lists should be the work of getting ready of the Lord. But our Christmas "to-do" lists usually include things like this:

> **Buy cards**...address cards...send cards...complain about postage

> **Buy gifts**...wrap gifts..send gifts...complain about shipping

> **Buy a tree**...decorate tree...complain about the price of trees

> **Untangle outside lights**...buy new lights...complain about having to put up lights.

> **Plan Christmas menu**, cook food, serve food, clean-up plates, complain about how long it takes to cook the meal and how fast people eat it and head back to the TV.

> **Get ready for the Christmas Eve service**, arrive late, complain that someone else is sitting in our Sunday morning seats.

Those are the kinds of things we get on our lists that we need to do to get ready for the coming of Christmas.

But nothing there has anything to do with preparing our hearts for the coming of our Lord into our hearts and lives...

...And nothing there, it seems to me, has anything to do with creating peace.

And yet, there is this sense of uncomfortable anticipation that the Lord may come at any time, and will there be a way into our hearts and lives?

So the image we are given is of roads.

Now, what do roads have to do with creating peace?

Roads in ancient times weren't good -- not even Roman roads. They were rutted. They had potholes. They had bumps in them. They were hard to make your way on them.

But when someone of importance or stature was traveling, attempts were made to make things smooth. It was not usual for those in authority to compel the persons whose homes had been built along the main road to go out and make the place smooth and level. It was consider everyone's responsibility -- even their duty -- to fix up the road.

We have the same sort of thing in our day. In many cities, different organizations will sponsor a

stretch of road. A youth group I led in Florida would go monthly to pick up litter along a piece of highway that we had adopted. Garden clubs will take on the responsibility of maintaining the landscaping along the main road into a town.

So people understood what Isaiah and John were saying when they spoke about smoothing out the bumps, filling in the potholes, leveling the grade. It didn't have to do with a physical road -- they knew that. It had to do with a spiritual and mental smoothing out of the place.

And that's what it means for us.

So when we are called to make ready smooth places, we are called to work on the roads, the streets, the lanes and the alleys of the relationships that connect us with other people.

And there is where we find the meaning.

The road we are called to work on -- the places we are to create peace -- are the places between us and other individuals.

It's not just about global conflict, because sometimes we feel like how in the world can we have any impact upon that?

We are called to think about the peace we make person-to-person, individual-to-individual.

And sometimes that kind of peace-making is even more difficult when we think about trying make peace with the family member who hurt us --

-- or the neighbor that has insulted us

-- or perhaps even the church member right here at Divine Street who disappointed us.... ??

Peace is not the absence of conflict.

Peace is the presence of shalom = wholeness, justice, and doing what is right -- no matter the circumstance.

Now, we would all agree that Jesus expects us to love and make peace with our enemies. But when we find that "enemy" to be someone in our own family...

- someone we used to be very close with...

- someone we'd rather avoid who lives just down the street or a couple blocks over...

- someone at church who spoke against or voted against an idea we had...

...we think we get a pass on that one.

You know -- that's just a little too close.

Because -- it can be much easier to love a stranger than somebody you used to love, or ought to love.

So I'm going to give you one specific thing to do to put on your list before Christmas.

Smooth out a bumpy place -- fill out a rut -- along a rough road that exists between you and someone else.

And you already know who that person is....

...you're already thinking about that one relationship...

- that old friend
- that former family member
- that co-worker...

...where there's a bumpy place.

And I want to you figure out what to do to make that place smooth. Because, you see, this is how the Lord will come to us.

This is how we will experience the presence of the Living Christ..

...in these relationships made right.

Now...I don't know what patching compound you're going to have to use...or what tools you will need.

It may mean that you will have to **go and confess** and **offer an apology**.

It may mean that you will have to **offer forgiveness** when a person hasn't apologized or asked for forgiveness.

It may mean that you **simply take something** like a warm loaf of fresh bread, and make an unexpected visit.

I don't know what it is you'll have to do.....Only you will know.

But know also -

- that roads aren't always repaired with one patch.

You might have to go back over it a few more times.

But, I do know this -- that:

- when you seek to create peace with a pure heart...

- when you give without expecting anything in return...

- when you forgive unconditionally...

you make the way smooth and the path straight for Emmanuel to come directly into the wilderness place... you sometimes find yourself...

...where he can lead you to the Kingdom of Peace,
where he is Prince forever and ever.