

“THE KISS OF PEACE”

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Turning from Psalm 80 from Psalm 85, we hear a more confident voice today. Though the Psalm begins with a tone of lament—“Will you be angry with us forever?”—her tone, nevertheless, moves toward a resolve and a grounding of conviction. Though the darkness is everywhere around us, I know the sun will rise again, she says, just as surely as it has before, because I know this God. I know the character of our God. Our God will not let it go on like this. Our God will not be angry with us forever. Our God will revive us again. God will speak to these bones and they will live. God will speak peace to us. The faithful among us will turn their hearts to God. Even though there is every visible reason to doubt this, *I am sure* God’s salvation is at hand...

Then comes the best part, the ending, in which the Psalmist describes a renewed harmony of relationships, and a stunning restoration of creation. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, righteousness will look down from the sky. Infertile land will become fertile again, and there will be bumper crops from now on. Doing the right thing will become the norm, and the wickedness that has been normalized will be exposed and dismissed. Righteousness will come down the freeway like a snowplow, clearing the way for Messiah.

To the pragmatist, this sounds like the longings of a dreamer...wishful thinking. But the scene is not so far removed from events with which we’re quite familiar. When I picture the ending, I see something like an impromptu street celebration at the end of hostilities. One of the most joyous times in our nation’s history was the end of World War II, August 14, 1945, V-J day. The announcement came over the radio that Japan had surrendered. In one instance, in New York City, people began to come out of the cafes and shops, giddy with the news. And there unfolded one of the most famous moments of the war’s ending, when a *Life* magazine photographer just happened to catch a Navy quartermaster, George Mendonsa—on leave from the Philippines—surprising a nurse with a kiss in Times Square. My favorite part of this photo is not the kiss, but Mendonsa’s girlfriend and future wife of nearly 70 years, standing in the background with a look of—how shall I put this—*surprise*.

As it turned out, this kiss was between two people who’d never met. And that is not unlike the kiss in this Psalm. In this vision of harmony and fulfillment, righteousness and peace kiss for what appears to be the first time in Scripture. Do you remember your first kiss? (I remember my first kiss. She doesn’t. Swing and a miss!) But for those of you who didn’t miss the mark, there is the excitement and euphoria of it. The romance. The simple pleasure. The surprise. That is what’s happening here. Righteousness and peace—here at the middle school dance—*kiss*. Even with the parents watching. And everyone is surprised they had it in them to smooch right there in front of God and everybody.

You see, at the middle school dance, up until now everyone has been on different sides of the room. Righteousness on this side, and peace on this side. They haven't been far from one another. They've been there in the same ball room, on the same dance floor. For example, Isaiah says, "The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" (Is. 32:17). But to this point righteousness and peace have been flirting with each other, trying to look at each other without the other noticing.

When we read about righteousness in the Old Testament, righteousness is usually dancing with someone else, like judgment or justice. In fact, this particular word for *righteousness* can also be translated *justice*. This righteousness has to do with setting things straight, whether judges or governors or kings accomplish it, or business owners or shopkeepers or artists or parents. Righteousness is the opening theme of Proverbs: "For gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity" (Pro. 1:3). Amos says, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amo. 5:24). These are the most common images we associate with righteousness. This righteousness is the righteousness of God: a God who aligns and justifies, a God who provides a counterbalance to imbalanced things, a God who establishes the law and upholds it, a God with belt loops from which hang levels, plumb lines, and measuring tape.

The peace that kisses back in this Psalm is the peace we've also heard called *shalom*, which has many synonyms: wellness, wholeness, tranquility, soundness, welfare. This peace is not merely the absence of war but the positive fulfilment of God's covenant relationship with God's people. If justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like category 5 rapids, peace is perhaps better described as the "still waters" of Psalm 23. So, we begin to see why it is surprising that these two would kiss. How do we hold these two realities together? How do we place Niagara Falls beside Lake Placid, without losing the inherent grandeur and beauty of both?

Advent is the time in which we begin to see ideas that don't go together come together. We begin to see people who don't go together come together. Relationships restored. Repairing breaches. Healing bodies, memories. Even healing of the land, the soil, the water, and the lives the land upholds and sustains.

In the beginning of Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, Mary receives news that she, in spite of being a virgin, will bear a son, and also that her relative, Elizabeth, is with child, in spite of being barren for many years. In her excitement, Mary runs to Elizabeth's house. Upon entering, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps at the sound of Mary's greeting. Here is a foreshadowing of righteousness and peace meeting. John the Baptist, wilderness prophet of righteousness, the greatest prophet of all Israel, leaps in the womb to greet the one called "Prince of Peace."

Yet, even these two will disagree as adults. John expected something different from the Messiah. He sends his messengers to inquire of Jesus, "Are you really the Messiah? Or are we supposed to wait for someone else?" To which Jesus replies, "What are you waiting for? The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor are hearing some good news for once" (Lk. 7:22).

Jesus *is* the kiss of righteousness and peace. In him we see their harmony as we never could before. Had it not been for Jesus, we could have—at best—only been disciples of John the Baptist. That would have been a fine thing to be, but we would have continued to hold our idea of righteousness on this side, and our idea of peace on the other, and they would still just be flirting with one another. Righteousness would still be, as John the Baptist thought of it, as a setting Israel free from Roman occupation. A sweep of the upcoming elections. And, finally, a restoration of the throne of David to its rightful heir.

But in Jesus we see the miracle of harmony between righteousness and peace, such that we can no longer associate one without the other. In Jesus, we see with clarity that without righteousness, there can be no peace, and that without peace, there can be no righteousness. Therefore, what God has joined together in Christ, let no one separate!

We see righteousness and peace kiss wherever God's dream comes to fruition by peaceful means. If you may recall last Sunday I called us to let our light shine. To grab a star from the darkness and make it our own, and to gather with hope as our collective light overwhelms the darkness.

These are not the fantasies of a dreamer. Nor is this an unrealistic depiction of a utopia. This is precisely the kind of thing that has happened, and that in Christ will continue to happen, every time people who dwell in darkness see a great light.

Many of our congregation may remember hearing news of when righteousness began meeting in a church, Thomaskirche, in Leipzig, Germany, in the 1980s. A small group dedicated to a more righteous Germany began to meet in the basement for prayer and organizing. Churches were the only places they were free to do so. Righteousness met every Monday, and Righteousness was bold and disciplined and passionate about their cause. Peace was in the room, too. So it became their practice for righteousness to light candles, and to hold candlelight vigils in the streets. And the cause for righteousness grew. Then one night, the authorities gave the order to dispatch Righteousness with gunfire. And the police showed up prepared to unload. But when they arrived, the streets were so full of Righteousness the police were stunned. Thousands upon thousands of Righteousness, there with their candles. The police were overwhelmed. And, because Righteousness was so busy holding their candles with one hand, and protecting their light from the wind with their other hand, they couldn't have fought back if they tried. And, there in the streets, on the dark side of the wall, Righteousness and Peace kissed. And faithfulness sprang up from the ground. And the Lord gave them what was good.

And the wall. came. down.

