

No Peace Without Peace Within

Luke 1:26-38 and Isaiah 40:1-11

An article in the NY Times caught my eye last week. It was titled: Pandemic-Proof Your Habits. The article was more psychological than spiritual in tone. But it had a lot to do with the topic of peace. The gist of the Times article was that human beings have a brain that is genetically wired to pursue that which gives us a sense of peace and security. We develop routines in life that make us feel secure and in control. These routines can range from the route you follow on your morning commute, to the coffee and donut you get to go on the way to work, to sitting in the same pew in church on Sunday.

Nothing wrong with that. But what happens when those ways of making us feel peace on the inside get taken away by changes in our environment that are beyond our control? When a morning commute is meaningless because the pandemic has left you without a job to go to? Or when getting that cup of coffee feels like playing Russian Roulette with the barista serving you, who for all you know, may be infected with COVID? Or when your favorite church pew and friends to sit with has turned into sitting alone on your couch for virtual worship?

Some of us will learn to adapt our routines to restore some semblance of internal peace. But some of us will insist on sticking with the same routines, which only makes the problems worse. Like the way Ignoring the warnings about avoiding crowded places and wearing masks in public postpones the day when those precautions will be unnecessary.

When we pray for peace, what is foremost on our mind is probably for God to bring peace to our external circumstances. Praying for God to restore peace by making what is outside of our control go away is a more attractive alternative than asking God to show us how to change what we have some control over.

There is a popular prayer, called the Serenity Prayer because it begins with a plea to God for serenity. Serenity is a synonym for peace. But nowhere in the Serenity Prayer is God asked to bring peace to the world around us. What it does ask of God, is for an interior serenity that can help us accept the things we have no control over, the courage to change the things over which we possibly do have some influence, and maybe most importantly, the wisdom to know the difference between one of those options and the other. Because without the wisdom to distinguish what we can control from what we cannot; peace can be an elusive goal to achieve. The road to peace offered by the Serenity Prayer doesn't rely on God changing the world around us. It is about turning to God to find peace within us.

During the time of the prophet Isaiah, many Israelites had been living as exiles in Babylon. Although they were homesick for the land they had been taken from, they had also settled into a comfortable existence where they were. When Cyrus, the King of Persia gave them permission to leave Babylon and go back home, the obstacle outside their control that had kept them captive, was removed. Figuratively speaking, God had leveled the hills and valleys that stood between them and where they wanted to be. Before they could take the first steps on that journey though, they had to confront the internal obstacles

that tempted them to stay put in Babylon, rather than brave the unknowns of what going home entailed. Many of them took the risk. But some chose to remain behind.

Sometimes, to get to the better peace God wants to give us means letting go of our limited methods for achieving peace. Mary learned that when an angel named Gabriel appeared to her with the news that God had chosen her to be the mother of God's son. Up to that moment, Mary was probably content with the way the map of her life was unfolding. There was a comfort in the traditional expectations of a young girl like her. She was engaged to Joseph. They would soon be married and they would raise a family. Joseph would support the family through his carpentry work and she would manage the household. She could look forward to a peaceful and secure life.

Gabriel's invitation not only didn't fit these plans, it would totally derail them. It says that Mary was "perplexed" by Gabriel's offer. Who could blame Mary for being confused about how she, a virgin, could be a mother? But the word translated here as "perplexed" means something more than idle curiosity. It can also mean being troubled or disturbed. Which sounds about right, doesn't it?

Giving birth to the Prince of Peace would require her to forfeit the peaceful life she had expected to lead. Before Mary could consent to preparing a place for God's Son in her body, she had to come to terms with preparing a place for God's peace in her spirit. When she let her reluctance show, Gabriel reminded her that however improbable a peaceful life might seem in this new scenario he had proposed, nothing is impossible with God.

In that instant, Mary was invited to find peace in her faith in God, rather than her trust in the traditions that defined her future until moment. It was then that she touched the wisdom to know the difference between peace without and peace within. She consented with the words, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done for me according to your word."

Getting back to that article in the Times. The writer's message is that for all the ways this pandemic has disoriented us and our peaceful routines, it also may be offering us the opportunity to establish new routines and habits that support inner peace even in the chaos created by this pandemic. Of course, we already had Isaiah and Mary to show us that road to true peace outside us begins with finding peace and wholeness within us.

In the jumbled reordering of what once offered a surface comfort and wishing for a return to what used to be, why not use these times as an opportunity to explore the deep peace which only God can impart to us, and develop new habits to obtain it? In the course of doing that, we might even discover that peace in the world around us is ultimately dependent on our reconnecting with the peace that lies within us.

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