

Seeking Truth and Mercy, Justice and Peace

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Psalm 85, John August Swanson

Preaching on:
Psalm 85

Welcome to Advent. Advent began last Sunday, of course, but I wasn't here because of an attack of the COVID upon my house. I'm testing negative now, but still wearing a mask to comply with CDC recommendations.

Thank you to everyone who stepped in and stepped up last week to make church happen without me. It's sort of a wonderful way to begin the new liturgical year—remembering that it takes the gifts of a whole community to worship God *every Sunday*, not just when I don't show up.

Worship should never be a monologue, it should never be a performance, it should never be consumed. Worship should be as diverse as the community, as robust as the community. Worship requires us. Together, we're all the resonating chamber of worship. Every one of us is a participant in forming this deep space—the size and the shape of this chamber. And when the Wind of the Spirit blows through us, the music that is produced is produced by all of us.

It takes the whole church. I really believe that. So, I account my illness and your readiness to step in and roll with it to be good news for us all on what was the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of this new liturgical year.

Advent is my favorite season of the year. Advent is dark. The days are still getting darker. The darkness is getting a little longer each night. The light is still fading from the sky. It's not Christmas yet. It's the long, long wait for Christmas. The long, long wait in the dark. It's not just four Sundays of waiting—Advent stands in for lifetimes of waiting, generations of waiting—for a million, or a billion, or more, long, dark nights of the soul.

And at the same time, in Advent, the lights are starting to go up in the night. The tree gets lit in the dark with the tiniest little lights—a twinkling of stars in the darkness. The menorah gets one more candle with each passing night. It's important to me that we recognize that Christmas doesn't just happen automatically. Christmas happens because we participate in Advent—all of us, our whole community—we participate.

In ancient times, on the night of the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, coming up on the 21st this year, the people would light fires and chant rituals to the sky to ensure that the sun reversed his course, to ensure that he didn't just diminish forever into the darkness, to ensure that there was a return to the light—that after winter there would be a spring again.

As Christians, we recognize that Jesus is the light, the true light that is coming into the world. And it's tempting to believe that God—being omnipotent, as we've been assured he must be, will just take care of everything without us. And yet Jesus came into the world asking us to follow him, to take up our crosses, to participate in the great religious drama of the struggle between day and night, light and shadow, in our world and within ourselves.

Worship can't happen without you. Christmas can't happen without you. And not everyone will agree with me, but I believe it to be true, that the goodness that God has in mind for this world will not come to pass without our commitment to it, without your participation in God's plan and Jesus' way. And I believe that need for you and that participation is best learned in the dark—with the faith and the hope

that our participation matters, that it does make a difference. And that's not easy to feel, is it? Not right now.

There are so many reasons to feel depressed and a little hopeless right now. I'm not going to list them all. But I'll tell you one that's been particularly on my own mind and heart the last two months—the war between Israel and Hamas: the sickening Hamas terrorist attack of October 7th, the plight of the Israeli and international hostages held in Gaza, the devastating IDF bombings in Gaza, the overwhelming suffering and death of the Palestinians in Gaza, and the disagreement and the moral confusion and the antisemitism and the attacks on Muslims and Palestinians here at home.

How can I feel hopeful in the face of such an enduring and divisive and devastating conflict? How can I participate, even in a small way, to help make peace when there is so much virulent and vindictive disagreement about which side to take in this war. People are being persecuted for showing even basic support and compassion to one side or the other. People saying “I stand with Israel” on social media have lost their jobs. People wearing black-and-white Palestinian scarves, keffiyeh, have been shot. Ivy-league presidents have pathetically fumbled basic questions about preventing antisemitism on campus. And at the UN, the US has vetoed the rest of the world's call for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, because the UN has so far refused to condemn Hamas and the October 7th attacks. So, we're living in what feels like the worst of all possibilities. Instead of condemning terrorism against Israelis and ending the bombing of Palestinians, we're suffering a grotesque moral failure of nerve. How do I step into that and actually make a difference?

And so we come to the 85th Psalm this morning. The 85th Psalm is a song of restoration. It's a song sung in a time of darkness, but looking toward the light. It begins by remembering God's goodness. And it acknowledges that we are living in a time that must be characterized by God's anger at our failures. And it asks God to intervene again, to show steadfast love, and to return to us again. It is a song that could have been sung on the winter solstice or lighting the candles on a menorah or decorating a tree—God how can we endure this darkness? Return to us again. Return to us again.

And then the song turns to hope. The Psalmist turns his eye to what God will surely do for the people. And there are these two wonderful lines of poetry: “Mercy and truth are met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” When God gets involved with us, and when we act upon God's involvement with us, it will be possible for truth and mercy to meet one another—it will be possible to condemn terrorism and to call for a humanitarian ceasefire. It's not one or the other, it's about finding the way through the dark for the two to meet. Because only if they meet will either of them be possible at all.

And true peace will be possible only when it has embraced justice. Peace cannot be made by an occupation or by a wall. Peace requires justice—a redress of the wrongs of the past tempered by the greater hope for the future. And justice will be possible when it has kissed peace. Justice cannot be made by revenge. Justice cannot be made by doing to the other what has been done to you. It can

only be achieved by doing to the other what you would have them do to you. Peace must accept that it is too weak to stand on its own. Justice must accept that without mercy and forgiveness it will ravage the world anew. It's not one or the other, it's about finding the way through the dark for the two to embrace. Because only if peace and justice kiss one another will either of them be possible at all.

Our job as Jesus' followers is to keep God's vision clearly in our minds and hearts—mercy and truth, righteousness and peace. In a time of war and division, we are called upon to do what we can to enact that vision without exacerbating the conflict. If we throw up our hands in despair or overwhelm or fear, God's vision will fail. Where do mercy and truth meet? Where do righteousness and peace kiss? In us! In our hearts and lives, in our communities and in our world. God has sown the seeds for peace and justice in us and the question is, what kind of soil will we be?

The Thursday before last, the Montclair Interfaith Clergy Association and the Montclair African-American Clergy Association held "A Sacred Space for Lament and Love During a Time of War" at the UU church in Montclair. We as local clergy got together in October and November and knew that we needed to do something to enact our values here in our community. If we didn't take a stand of love and support for everyone—of truth and mercy, justice and peace—we knew that greater conflict and even violence might erupt in our own community. And we knew the only way we could achieve such a space—such a resonating chamber—was by including the participation of everybody. And so local rabbis spoke, and a local imam. A Palestinian-American woman spoke. And an Israeli-American woman spoke. Each spoke their truth in turn. And after each person spoke their truth, all of us in attendance—about 100 diverse community members—said together to that person, "We hear you, and we love you."

It was not an end to war or to conflict. It was not the dawning on that great morning we all hope and long for. But it was a beginning. And it was profound. It was an utterance of truth and mercy, of righteousness and peace, spoken from the depths of the darkness, calling the light back into the world.