

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF EVERETT

December 10, 2023 – 10am

Scripture Isaiah 40:1-11

Sermon *Simple Peace* Rev. Dr. Alan Dorway

This past Wednesday, Sonya Beardsley and I visited Hugh and Jackie Minor. We shared communion and had a wonderful time together.

However, my cell phone was blowing up. I usually leave it in my pocket, but I was concerned something had happened, so I peeked. My good friends were in a texting frenzy. This happens occasionally.

After our visit and I returned home, I checked the 30 or so text messages from my guys. They were reaching out to our friend Jeff, who still lives in Las Vegas due to the shooting on UNLV's campus.

Immediately, I thought of one of Peyton's classmates who is studying at UNLV, Vicki texted their family, and called my parents just to make sure everyone I knew was okay.

Of course, for three faculty members families and loved ones, even for the shooter's family that will now have to deal with the fall out, life will not be the same.

We know the ripple effects of violence and can imagine them radiating through the university's student community, the lives of the police, the EMT's, the other teachers, the doctors and nurses, plus the fact in October 2017 the largest mass shooting in our country took place on the south end of the Strip during a country music festival, trigger frustration and memory throughout Vegas, as ripples move out beyond one local location and travel around the world.

The problem is the non-shock of this shooting.

I did not know this, but the day before, six people were killed in a shooting in Austin, TX.

According to the Gun Violence Archive in October, we have had 627 mass shootings this year after the gunman in Lewiston, Maine. Mass shootings are defined as an incident in which four or more victims are shot or killed. With these statistics in 2021, we had 690 mass shootings. In 2022, we had 645. Yet, (in October) we are on pace to have a record year in 2023.

While this is staggering, I just love how about every article ends with the idea when the American people have had enough, then policy will change.

I know I may be getting too political for some, even myself, but when I get spiraling in my brain, even if I take a walk or try to meditate or do anything to get my mind off these events, it is difficult. I do not let go easily.

On Wednesday and Thursday, my mind spun out of control thinking about gun violence in our country.

Which spun off to confusion over the horrific bombing and killing of Palestinians in Gaza. True, my mind continued to spin as we know that violence started as a response to the horrific killing of Israelis by the terrorist group Hamas.

But my mind does not stop there, I think about the war in the Ukraine. I think about clashing groups of people in other countries that barely make our news radar even though hundreds die or suffer or are displaced because of the need for power.

This may not make sense, but this is how my mind works, and I circle back to issues in our country over racism, sexism, injustice, corruption, the lack of funding for important social programs or the concern as a school district in our county contemplates dropping librarians, music, and sports, because we all know what we find on the internet should take the place of true learning and actual facts, and I know my mind is not helpful because as a pastor I am supposed to have theological answers pointing us toward hope and goodness gracious, this Advent week is about peace.

How can I preach on peace, how can we think about peace, how can we even begin to unwind our perceived notion of peace to a vision of God's peace, when at times there is no visible example of peace?

And even when I caught my breath before Thursday bible study and into Friday, I cannot hide from my own hypocrisy on peace. How can I be for peace when I want it to look like I think it should look?

How can I preach peace when part of my solution is to punish harshly those I view as perpetrators of a crime?

How can I understand peace when there is a part of me that keeps tabs on those who have hurt me and while I would love to tell them, hey, you owe me for what you did, I also know I have been petty, I have hurt others, I have been angry and wished harm toward others, and I know, I know, I am not better than anyone because while it is easy to project my ire of injustice outwards, I am a sinner. Just like everyone else.

I want to yell at Jesus, just where are the peacemakers you talked about in the Sermon on the Mount?

Where are current examples of women and men of faith working toward peace?

I've been honest in this sermon, but there is one more part I will share, I am exhausted, fatigued to the point my compassion and empathy is stretched thin, and I wonder, do I have faith enough to trust peace is an option in our lives, let alone God bring it?

The people Isaiah is talking to in chapter 40 stand in a wasteland of confusion. Isaiah has just outlined 39 chapters of prophecy that God is not happy with the idols, the hollow religious festivals, the greed, the petty disputes, and the sin of the people.

Their sin and unfaithfulness are laid out for everyone to see. Whether or not they have gone into exile or not, they have come face to face with their humanity. They have had their record of what they may have thought was a passing grade of being God's people exposed as severely lacking and God is not pleased.

The people, like us, find that everything they thought they were doing for justice, for righteousness, for the common good, for their own devotion toward God, even though they knew it may not be perfect, but hey, who is? Was not pleasing to God at all.

They were so off base, now God has pronounced judgement on them, not only on their enemies.

Maybe this is how we feel someday. Like I did this past week. We want to believe peace is attainable, but with the way fear, war, and violence spiral out of control as well as being familiar with our own sinful tendencies, we struggle with how we take one step forward or if we can make a difference?

Mercifully, we have chapter 40.

Into our world, our confusion, our questions, and our hearts, God speaks comfort. Comfort my people.

Into our pride, war, terror, violence, pain, suffering, and sin, we hear God proclaiming comfort.

Comfort my people, I, God, have broken the cycle of sin.

Comfort my people, I, God, want you to hear this, I am in control, and I bring peace.

Here God speaks words even better than be still. Comfort.

God is speaking tenderly; we have paid for our sin.

We have served our term. Our penalty is paid.

It may not make sense to our ears or our hearts, but comfort. Be at peace.

We know we are grass and the grass withers and fades. We blow away with the wind, but there is a voice calling out: prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord is coming.

This voice is calling to make a preparation where the mountains and the valleys will be smoothed over.

Rather than climbing and descending, there will be a level path as the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

This is a herald of good news, do not fear, the Lord is coming, not to punish the other or to do what we want, but to bring comfort and relief. To bring peace. To all.

The Lord is coming as our shepherd, to feed his sheep, to gather them, and lead them. Yet, this leading is not like a task master, but as a compassionate, restorative, and protective act as God picks us up to carry us close to his heart.

During Advent, we look move through the themes of hope, joy, love, and today, peace. Our goal as a congregation this season is to be aware of the simple acts in our lives that highlight those themes.

We know people in our world, nation, and community who work for and toward peace.

I know there are people working for peace.

I am grateful for Usama; the host I've had in Israel/Palestine the two times I've been blessed to travel there. I am older than him, he's been jailed multiple times as a youth for no reason other than to rat out true instigators, he's seen the worst, known those who have been killed and broken, and still, he works for reconciliation. There in Bethlehem.

I have met pastors in Israel/Palestine, who are gracious, loving, and work toward peace in their communities.

We have met Daoud Nassar whose whole approach on his family's olive farm, Tent of Nations, pressed in by settlements aiming to force him off his land, is peace. They do not return evil for evil, they aim to work and promote peace, community, education and understanding.

I have been blessed to meet Joan Demming who is the former CEO of Friends of Ibillin, the goal of which aims to promote justice, grace, and education while working with partners to break down walls on prejudice here and in the Holy Land.

We know Heidi and Eli Salaki who work in our community to bring advocacy, education, and peace. I know and we can list leaders of organizations, those who serve in elected positions, those who work as lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, in businesses and non-profit organizations aiming to bring peace here in our community and country.

We know there are people working for peace. Thinking about making peace simple, bite size, is difficult.

I get swept up in trying to control the immediate, my way of justice bringing peace. We know Jesus has the long view of peace in his control and we know others, maybe even ourselves, are willing to take the one step,

one piece, one moment toward peace. Even when it feels overwhelming and we yearn to hear again, comfort, comfort my people.

Today, maybe we are invited to think about the concept of a divot. When a golf ball lands on a green, the green being the place where golfers putt, it leaves a mark.

When a ball lands on the green, a small or large indentation is left. This is a divot. Golf etiquette states one should repair their divot as a courtesy for others playing.

This is not just tapping down of the edge or dragging your foot over it to 'make' it level, but using a tool, taking a moment, one can lift the edges, and while not perfect, repair the green. Why is this important?

Because even a weekend hacker like me knows you drive for show and putt for dough.

And it is frustrating when you putt and the ball is going towards the goal and a divot, an uneven spot created by someone else, moves your ball off the target.

The embarrassing thing for golfers is there are signs asking you to fix your divot and another. This recognizes others are not taking a moment to care or to play within the rules. So, golf courses are appealing to the good side of people, just to help out and make the greens a nicer place than some we all find where a helicopter must have dropped a hundred balls down to crater the green.

It's the concept, if we all did one small thing, whether it's our fault or not, take a moment, take a breath, and be a change agent, fix a divot, pick up a piece of trash, hold the door open for someone, listen more, or whatever just one small thing we could do, then we could change the world.

This may be oversimplified, but when my mind spirals out of control. When we cannot sleep because there are people suffering. When we do not see a way for those without to have adequate food, clean water, medical care, and comfort.

Maybe just one small thing, one act of mercy and kindness we do, today, here, with our family, to our friends, in the line at the grocery store, or in our practice of being a neighbor, cleaning up that divot, will bring about peace.

Will bring about words of comfort to another. Will break the cycle of anger leading to violence. Will help another and ourselves stop, repent, and experience grace. Will remind ourselves God is hugging us close.

Hope, peace, joy, and love are not just for this season. These themes begin our year as disciples and focus us on the year to come.

In Advent, we journey again to the manger. Follow the star in hope. Rejoice with the shepherds as the angels proclaim Jesus is born. Find love has come down, Emmanuel is with us. And as another verse from Longfellow's poem, which we sang today, in the manger, we discover the prince of peace enters in and grace imparts within our hearts, peace of earth, good will to all. Amen.

This sermon was preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Everett on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2023. Every sermon is an interaction between pastor and congregation. Therefore, while these are the words on the page, in the moment as the Holy Spirit directs and the congregation seeks God together, the spoken word may have been different. These are the words and thoughts of the Rev. Dr. Alan Dorway.