

## “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be!”

Have you ever been in a situation— or observed a situation— and thought to yourself: “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be”? I have that reaction more often than I like, and especially when I watch the news.

Like when I see what’s going on in Syria.

Or, when I hear about what’s apparently *not* going on in Congress.

Or, what happened just a couple of days ago in San Bernardino.

When I hear about such things, I just want to shake my head, because this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. If you’ve ever felt this way, then you have a pretty good understanding of the biblical concept of sin.

As it works out, the biblical concept of sin is made up of two components. One is the sense that something is not right; that this isn’t the way things are supposed to be. But before you can come to that conclusion, you also need to have a vision of the way things are *supposed* to be, and that’s the second component. And what that means, is that the biblical notion of sin is a derived concept: only when you have a sense of what is right, of how things ought to be, can you then say that something is wrong. And in scripture, the vision for how things ought to be is something we call *shalom*.

*Shalom* is a Hebrew word, which we will often translate into English as “peace,” but that’s really too simplistic a rendering. Because in the scriptures, *shalom* refers to a state of being in which:

all of creation experiences wholeness;

all of creation flourishes;

all of creation lives in harmony; and

all of creation takes delight in the rest of creation.

And when the prophets we read about in scripture talked about *shalom*, they would describe it in terms of it being a time when, for example:

crookedness would be made straight;  
when rough places would be made smooth;  
when flowers would bloom in the desert;  
when weeping would cease;  
when the lion would lay down with the lamb;  
when the foolish would be made wise;  
when the wise would be made humble; and  
when swords are beaten into ploughshares.

It's a time, in other words, when all nature is fruitful and benign; when nations sit together for a sumptuous feast; and when all of creation will look to God, and walk with God, and take delight in God. In the Bible, *shalom*, peace, is the way things are supposed to be.

Sin, on the other hand, is the way things *aren't* supposed to be. Sin, is a violation of *shalom*, a violation of God's peace. And when sin is at work:

the good things of creation are made to serve unworthy ends;  
things that belong together are split apart;  
things that should be separated are put together; and  
personal, social, and natural integrity is corrupted.

And I'm sure you've all witnessed examples of what I'm talking about.

However, for me to stand here and talk about sin on the Second Sunday of Advent, when Christmas is only nineteen days away, may be something of a downer, because most people are simply trying to get into the holiday spirit. And wouldn't it be nice if the people who had decided what we'd hear from scripture today had cooperated with our efforts?

However, rather than being treated to a story about the baby Jesus, or heavenly choirs of angels, our gospel reading tells us about a rough and tumble prophet named John, who goes around telling people they they're sinners, that they need to repent and get baptized. I mean, it's hardly the fare of hearts seeking to be "strangely warmed."

And then, to add insult to injury, this morning, just as happens every Sunday, after Fr. Jeff read the gospel, he had the audacity to proclaim, "The gospel of the Lord" — which is to say, "the Good News of the Lord." And today, and *especially* today, we may be thinking, "Seriously?" I mean, even if we were to acknowledge that some spiritual housekeeping might be in order, I'm still not sure we'd want to call what we've just heard good news. And yet, I believe there is a way that we can see John's message as good news. In fact, I think there are three ways.

First, if we hear John's message, and it rings true— if we have ever said, "This is not the way things are supposed to be"— then that tells us that we already know what God's peace, God's shalom, is supposed to look like; which means we already have a vision for how things are supposed to be. And therefore, that means we have been:

reading and studying the scriptures;

we've been paying attention to our religious traditions;

we've been praying and meditating; and

we've been observing the created world around us.

In other words, if we can hear and respond to John's message about sin, then we must already know about God's peace. And that is good news.

A second way we can see John's message as good news, is in understanding that John isn't saying, "You know, people, things aren't the way they're supposed to be, and they never will be, so get used to it!" John's message is not one of

futility. Rather, it's a hopeful call to change the way things are into the way things ought to be. In other words, it's a message that we can do something about the way things are.

We can be a people who promote abundance.

We can be a people who seek wholeness.

And we can be a people who work to restore harmony.

To be able to hear and respond to John's message is good news, because despite the fact that things aren't the way they should be, they can change, and so can we.

People can stop killing each other.

Hungry people can get fed.

Parents can love their families and raise healthy children.

Enemies can become friends.

And so, it is good news to know that we are free to respond to God's call to *shalom*.

Finally, we can hear John's message as good news because, if we already know God's peace, and if we can respond to the call of God's peace, then, in some deep way, we already trust in the eventual *triumph* of God's peace.

In our gospel reading, John is described, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, as:

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough way made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

It's a description which includes a series of emphatic statements, but especially this: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And that, my friends, is good news; in fact, it is *the Good News*.

Yes, things aren't the way they are supposed to be. But we already know God's vision of *shalom*. We can turn our hearts and minds toward God's purposes. And we can trust that someday all things will be put to rights:

that all tears *will* be wiped away;

that all swords *will* be beaten into ploughshares; and

that all flesh *will* see the salvation of God.

God, and God's peace, *will* triumph in the end. And we know this because, in the birth of Jesus,

these eyes of ours have seen the savior, who is Christ the Lord, and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

No, things aren't the way they are supposed to be; but we know this because we already know God's peace. And through a process we call repentance, we can align ourselves with God's purposes God's peace; with the way things are supposed to be. And we can do this in a spirit of gratitude, joy, and trust, because we have been given the promise of the eventual triumph of God's *shalom* in the birth of a baby who is the prince of peace. And that, my friends, isn't just good news; it's great news!

Amen.