Peace, now there’s a subject we don’t talk about much. The truth is we talk about it all the time. Our church is a part of the Baptist Peace Fellowship, so we ought to know something about peace. Two years ago, we took time in every worship service to remember a Baptist Peacemaker and perhaps imagine what it might mean for us to be peacemakers. So what more do we need to say? We have talked the peace game. Can’t we talk about something else?

Peace is not only the destination. Peace is the process. Peace permeates our worldview. We see everything through the peace lens. And the truth is that we can’t make room for peace unless we do the other sacred work that we have focused on this past month. Justice is the ground on which peace is planted. Compassion is the method of interacting with others. Our choices make up the directions for our life that lead toward peace. Mercy is the posture of God when we make our missteps on the road to peace. All of this is our sacred work. We need this peace focus, especially as we head into Lent this week.

The scripture from Isaiah is a vision of peace. It is God who guides and protects. The people will have land and food, and liberation. The mountains and hills we be made low and there will be a peace-filled highway for God. And on that road shall come all those who have been scattered. And God, will act like a loving mother singing us lullabies in the dark nights of our souls. Isn’t that an image of peace?

Listen to the promise from Isaiah again: “I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion desolate heritages.” God has remembered the people even in the midst of their exile. And God will call them back. God will put an end to their homelessness and their shame.

Eight years ago, we were dealing with our own regional exile. We were part of the Mid-American Baptist Churches. But they made two decisions that sent us into exile. The first was that they amended their by-laws to declare that the practice of homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching. They then voted to never recognize the ordination of any openly gay or lesbian pastor. We knew that these decisions made members of our congregation and others we loved second class citizens. We spent many months encouraging our colleagues to not make these decisions. But when they did, it became impossible to us to stay with any integrity. So we pitched our tent far from home in the Rochester, New York region. The promise of Isaiah that God would be with us in this time of exile sustained us. And now we use our best energy to seek peace. We use our best energy to focus on God’s agenda for justice and peace instead of being in a reactionary position of having to defend our right to be at the table.
My friend and colleague Ann Keeler Evans wrote in a recent blog:

“At some point or another, we all walk away from some part of our past. Sometimes we allow that present to simply fade to black. Other times, we take our leave with a satisfying slam of the door. (Sadly, this tends to be satisfying only in the moment.) But it’s important, after we’ve grieved and healed, to discern where we will next make ourselves at home. Sometimes it’s a long journey, 40 years in the making. Sometimes knowing Peace exists allows us to leave. But Peace is a communal activity. We must find our new home in a Peaceful neighborhoods and begin to make it a better place for everyone.” (Living La Vida Local on February 28, 2014—annkeelerevans.org)

God says to the prisoners “Come Out” in verse 9, “to those in the darkness, “show yourselves.” No more hiding in closets of secrets. No more hiding in prisons of your own making or the prisons of anothers whim. Come out, says God.

“They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture.” This is not a people who will be in hiding. You will be exposed and not have to fear for your life. That’s God’s plan.

I think of the people in Syria, in Afghanistan, in Ukraine. They cannot be in the open just yet. But it is God’s will that we will all live in peace.

The word continues, “The people will not hunger or thirst. The weather will not defeat them.” We could use a little of that assurance right about now. “God will lead them to springs of water.” There is nothing like a stream of water. I am imagining streams of melting waters right now. And if God were writing in Minnesota after a long winter instead of Israel, I’m sure that would be in the image.

Sheila sent me an email yesterday saying that the roofers were here getting rid of our ice dams and that Adele’s garden outside the portico looks like the Alps. And I am imagining all of those mountains of snow becoming living streams and exposing a highway for our God. The crocuses are itching to poke through those 3 feet on the ground. We can’t wait for the peace of Spring when we at least see the ground that has been buried since November.

And even after all of that praise and assurance. We still can’t believe it. We doubt like the people doubted long ago. They never thought they would return from exile. It’s just words you say to calm us, to make us complacent. We know the truth.

“God has forsaken us and forgotten us”, we lament along with Zion. We have cried out in our despair. Will this winter of our discontent never end? Will I eve find the job or the love I crave? Will there only be heartache for me? God has forsaken and forgotten us.

I like the way Rev. Doug King puts it: “Is it ever enough? What would a grand and powerful gesture of God be if we did not respond with a whine? The mountains get it, the children of God, not so much. It is not easy for us to let go of suffering. Even when all of creation is recognizing God’s comforting power…the people of God are too busy decrying how God has forsaken them to recognize how keenly they are remembered and how gloriously they have been freed. Perhaps we do not need so much to pray for God’s intercession in the midst of our brokenness as to pray for the discernment to recognize how God is already interceding for us.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2 pp.390,1)
And the answer of scripture is that God has not and cannot forget, no more than a woman can forget her nursing child. God then says, “I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” And there the scripture ends. But it is missing its therefore. Therefore, since I have not forgotten you. Therefore since all if not lost. Therefore since you are holy and beloved to me. Live in the ways of peace. Or it will all happen again. Do your sacred work of justice, compassion, mercy. Make good choices that lead to peace. When you do that, then you will feel the very blessing of God.

Verse 12 gives a universal vision. People will come from the north and the south, the east and the west. And heaven itself will break forth in joy. It is no accident that Jerusalem has peace as its last name. Jeru means City and Salem means peace. Kind of like Shalom or Salaam. Coming together in the city of Peace. That’s the hope of the return from the exile. That’s the hope that we cling to, as if on a cliff, with our bloody fingernails.

I like the prayer written a couple generations ago by the martyred Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador:

> It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
> The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
> it is even beyond our vision.  
> We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
> of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
> Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying  
> that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
> No statement says all that could be said.  
> No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
> No confession brings perfection.  
> No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
> No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
> No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
> This is what we are about.  
> We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
> We water seeds already planted,  
> knowing that they hold future promise.  
> We lay foundations that will need further development.  
> We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
> We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation  
> in realizing that. This enables us to do something,  
> and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,  
> but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
> an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
> We may never see the end results, but that is the difference  
> between the master builder and the worker.  
> We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
> We are prophets of a future not our own.
Sisters and brothers, the sacred work of peacemaking has as it’s part to remember
that you are not responsible to make peace all by yourself. God has already established it.
And we are to recognize it and join with those who want to keep its blessed vision alive.
That’s is what the church is for. It is to keep the vision of peace alive.
That’s our therefore.
That’s our reason for being.
It’s about saving lives.
It’s about pointing to a still better way.
It’s to remind people that whatever despair they see or experience, it is not part of
God’s plan.
- God calls us out of our prisons of despair.
- Out of our prisons of secrets.
- Out of our prisons where bullies beat us into submission.
- Out of the prisons of addiction.
- Out of the spiritual prisons where we believe that we are not worthy or not loved
  by God.
- Out of the prisons that tell us that only might makes right.
- Out of the prisons that prejudgets someone based upon what they look like or
  whom they love.
- God calls us out of those prisons and calls us to envision a land beyond the desert,
beyond the winter, beyond the hopelessness.
- God calls us to remember Jerusalem. That great city of a hill that means peace.
Remember that vision and live into it as best we can.
And when we do that, then we live the promise of Isaiah:

You shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be your pasture; you
shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike you down,
for Go who has pity on you will lead you, and by springs of water will guide you.
And God will turn mountains into a road, and highways shall be raised up.
People shall come from all directions.

And we will live toward peace. For it is in that peace that we tap into the great
power of God and join in the sacred work of bringing peace to a world in need and
building up a well of peace in our souls. That’s our sacred work.