



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

November 21, 2021 “Peace as Level Ground”

Rev. David Jones

As I was struggling a little bit to get going on a message for today, Caity said to me, “why don’t you try to get in the Christmas spirit?” I haven’t done anything in particular to deserve the Christmas spirit—we haven’t even put up a tree yet!--but Caity’s reminder to me that the spirit is there for me to receive just the same, reminded me of a story from my childhood. Or, not really a story, but a memory of my father that he has shared with me vividly enough that, with time, I have made it into a memory of my own.

When I was very little, my parents took my sister and I on a vacation to a beautiful family resort in Vermont. It was the kind of place with a fancy dining room, with entertainment, with endless activities for families, all in the beautiful setting of the Green Mountains. It was a place to relax and forget your troubles, a peaceful place.

And one night, my parents decided they’d like to enjoy a romantic dinner on their own, and this was the kind of place that provided excellent childcare close-by, so parents could really enjoy their evening without worrying. When they dropped us off, my fearless big sister no doubt started exploring and making friends with every other kid there; she was always a free-spirit, the kind of person who takes pride in thriving on their own. But her little brother was a little different.

My parents set me down—I was maybe 3 or 4 years old—and the moment my dad let go of me, I immediately began to shake uncontrollably. Where my sister was always sharp and determined, I was prone to fits of imagination and doubt. I knew my parents had brought us to a strange place, far away from home. But we were together, we had gone to have fun together. Now I was being left behind not only in a strange place, but in a place where the kids outnumbered adults—a lawless place, I was sure. My parents were leaving me here, alone but for my intrepid sister. I knew she was older, a graduate of kindergarten and carrying on quite well in the first grade, but I worried despite her worldly experience, she could still be reckless and naive. We didn’t belong here in these mountains in Vermont without our mom or dad; something was seriously wrong.

So my parents left us to go and enjoy a much deserved, relaxing dinner. And I was a wreck, still shaking from the mounting sense that I had been left behind not just for the night but forever. I was too ashamed, too afraid to speak up for myself, I was too embarrassed even to cry where others might see me. But I couldn’t help from shaking—my whole body was in protest against my own will, proclaiming that a life without some peace in it is unbearable. Even my sister, brave as she was, wasn’t enough to steady me.

My parents sat down for dinner, but the image of their child in such distress was inescapable. And it was my dad who finally decided he couldn’t enjoy his meal until he had gone back to check on me. He and my mom came back, he scooped me up from the heap I was in. And I stopped shaking. He had a power my sister and all the other children did not have: he had the power to give me peace. Or he had the power to intervene into my imagination, to turn my imagination in another direction. He had the power to relieve me of the doubt or the fear that had built up in my mind and in my body that had made finding peace on my own impossible. And he gave this memory to me, and it is the memory of myself as a child seen through his eyes, that is a peaceful place for me today.

Sometimes peace works like that. We're often taught or implored to find peace on our own, that we actually have to rely on ourselves to generate it from within. I do believe that is at least partly true. But sometimes what has built up to block us from doing this has become too heavy to lift on our own, and all that is left to us is for our bodies to shake under it. And of course, fear feeds on fear, our body's shaking gains its own momentum and steadying ourselves only gets more difficult, only requires more effort. And when it is only a child, or when it is someone that is truly vulnerable, maybe it is not enough just to say, 'well they should be able to find peace within.' Maybe it is also necessary for someone trusted, someone dear to us or someone who has power in our eyes, to show up for us, to intervene, to actually give us peace like a gift *first*.

We all say people should believe in themselves. And they should. But doesn't every loving parent or any inspired teacher or a compassionate nurse recognize that they have a role to play too, that before a small child or a student or a patient can grow and fulfill their potential, they must be alerted to the fact that it is there? We all need that, I think. Otherwise, our imaginations—just from a lack of perspective or experience—can too easily go in the wrong direction. Yes, we should believe in ourselves, but I think we all know and have seen and have felt that doing that is a lot easier when someone else has believed in us first.

In our world today, sometimes we imagine things that aren't there. But more often we see things all too clearly. This has been a hard week for me to get into the Christmas or holiday spirit; a hard week to dwell on peace. The news from Michigan...did not put me in a peaceful place.

Sometimes in the season of Advent we can imagine things in scripture that aren't there. There isn't glistening snow and hot coco, there aren't twinkling lights in evergreens, there aren't stores filled to the brim with toys and gifts, there aren't exactly Christmas cookies in scripture...Our ancestors in faith too rarely knew such peaceful things.

Our reading from Baruch remembers a time of exile, a time of real not imagined fears, and remembers not the uncontrollable shaking of a young boy on a vacation, but the uncontrollable shaking of an entire nation longing for home. Just like Isaiah, Baruch imagines the return of an exiled people to its rightful home. And Baruch says that this return, this restoration, will not just be in the heart or in the imagination, that actually the world itself—the horizon, the landscape—will change, high mountains and everlasting hills will be made low, and the valleys that separate us and make our road so crooked and our way so hard to make, will be filled in.

John the Baptist in our reading from Luke says, "prepare the way," using this same language of profound, earthly change. Unevenness, disparity, inequality in the soil and rock itself must end, however attached to the land we have become, because there is no more beautiful sight in the eyes of the God of Israel than level ground where all God's children can walk safely. We and all God's creatures were given to the level ground of Eden long before the mountains and valleys came between us.

We know our hilltowns are beautiful because of their hills and valleys, but we also know that life is hard here in Franklin County. *That* is not something we have imagined. We know it is difficult for our children to go to school and grow and fulfill their potential when they do not have enough to eat. We know it is a hard, not a smooth way for workers who have to take a second or even a third job to keep up with the rising costs of housing, healthcare, and education. We know that our community has become too fragmented, too divided, that many of us are languishing in isolation and loneliness. And we know that for over three decades the Food Pantry has valiantly filled in the valleys of hunger. And yet new valleys confront us, and the hills are only getting steeper.

Prepare the way, says the Baptist. The way is level, and it is safe for all. Safety is not only about terrain, it is about nourishment; it is about belief in one another. And peace is not just the goal, it is not just the end of our journey, it is also the means by which we will get there.

But when we are hungry and tired and fed up, when we are shaking as a community—like hunger in the belly—we need to recognize that our bodies are in protest, that we cannot go on like this, that none of us can really enjoy our next meal when we know we have left someone behind without one. No one can enjoy a table that isn't big enough for them or big enough for their family and friends.

We are here today, with Pat and with Sam, we are here for the sacrament of communion, because we refuse to accept this situation. We are here now, even in this hard place, to join together to prepare the soil, to level it for a garden that can grow something new, and to build a table big enough for everyone and with food enough for everyone.

There is a great miracle in our scriptures and in the witness of our ancestors: like a parent or a teacher, we learn that God does believe in us first. And God loves us first too, and God never stops loving us, never gives up or loses faith. God relentlessly, tirelessly devotes God's energy to us, in the great hope that we will finally accept this gift of belief. Because when we accept God's faithfulness to us, when we see and feel and know that our well being and our lives are a gift, and that the best of this life is given to us from outside without merit or without judgement of any kind—that in fact, none of us have to do anything or achieve anything to deserve a peaceful life—then suddenly we are liberated as the children of God to offer peace as a gift to each other. Suddenly we are liberated to offer peace as a gift even to the world. This is what God gives to us all—owes to us like a parent—the *right* to a peaceful life, as an inheritance. In the hard world of today, with hills and valleys in our way, we lose sight of this. We are here to remember and to accept peace from God, so that we can share it.

It is because our bodies are imprinted with God's peace that when we are forced to live without peace, we shake. We know something is terribly wrong. Our hunger, our anxiety, our sick-with-worry, our feeling lonely or incomplete, our uncontrollable shaking is a physical response and a kind of shelter to protect God from the jagged ways of the world. But the message of the prophets from Baruch to the Baptist, is good news. The message is that it is the world that will be shaken, it is the crooked paths that will be made straight, it is the hungry who will be filled. God has come back for us. Because peace is God's way, and we are each here to prepare it.

Alleluia and amen.