

Walking the Walk

A Sermon for Morning Worship with Communion on the Second Sunday of Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 6, 2015
Text: Micah 4:1-5

Depending on your thinking, the fact that peace is the focus of this second Sunday of Advent is either supremely ironic or incredibly prophetic. Peace is about as far removed from the events of this past week as it's possible to be. One undeniable fact has been reported by multiple news media outlets this past week: We have now had more mass shootings in the United States than there have been days in the year. Holy cow. What is happening to us and to our world? Is it possible than we are becoming immune to gun violence as a defense mechanism? It's just too scary to think about it happening to us, so we just don't think about it. But, that doesn't seem to be working too well since the problems of gun violence in the US and terrorist attacks around the world are only getting worse. And worse. And worse.

Most distressing to me this past week was the New York Daily News' big banner headline this past Thursday– “God Isn't Fixing This.” The lead article in the paper screamed this headline in response to Congressional leaders offering words of prayer in the wake of the San Bernardino shooting. The headline sparked outrage for obvious reasons and touched off quite a conversation in social media about “prayer shaming” politicians. The article

was written in recognition of the calls across social media the day of the attack for our leaders to do something more than pray. I get that sentiment. I even agree with it. But the headline was still very troubling to me because the New York Daily News was basically denigrating prayer as meaningless and pointless. And at least some of the social media response revealed that a lot of people agreed with that sentiment. That is sad and troubling for so many reasons. Not the least of which is that this attack on prayer is the last thing our country, our world for that matter, needs right now. Frankly we need prayer and a lot of it right now but you have to understand prayer to know that. You have to have experienced prayer to know it is not, can never be, a meaningless action, even if some politicians' sincerity in offering it in response to tragedy is questionable. Prayer by its very nature changes the person praying and that changes the situation the prayer is seeking to address. But, if you don't have a relationship with God, and you equate prayer with meaningless mumbling of words to a fantasy figure in the sky, then you will think prayer means nothing, does nothing. If the world is indeed shifting toward the belief that "God Isn't Fixing This," then we're all in deep trouble.

The sentiment "God Isn't Fixing This" actually misses the point of prayer and faith in the midst of real life completely. It reflects an understanding of prayer that is grossly misinformed, even juvenile. It equates prayer with writing a letter to Santa

Clause, listing your wants and dreams, hoping that Santa will decide you are worthy to receive the gifts you ask for. Dear Friends, a letter to Santa is not prayer nor is God Santa Clause. Prayer is instead the gateway to your relationship with God. It is how you open yourself up to the movement of God in your life. Prayer is not placing an order for what you want to have happen. Prayer is engaging in conversation with God as you would a trusted friend, only so much more because God is so much more. Prayer is the mechanism we have for connecting with the divine center of the cosmos, for sensing, for knowing that there is so much more going on around us than what we can see or taste or touch or hear. Prayer is our link with a divine energy source that defies description, but as we practice prayer consistently and hopefully, our ability to strengthen that connection grows stronger and stronger.

But it does look crazy to outsiders. It does look like we're talking to ourselves, like we're deferring all action and responsibility to some deity up in the sky. The ancient Greeks had a name for that approach to faith and prayer – *deus ex machina*. The “god machine” was actually an often used plot device in Greek tragedies. The playwright would create a plot in which the hero found himself in an impossible situation with no hope or survival. And that's when the “god machine” would kick in – the god miraculously appearing and intervening so the hero not only

survived by won the contest that moments ago had threatened to take his life. That's what people who don't get prayer, don't get faith, think we're doing when we pray to God in times of distress or fear or worry or anxiety. They believe we're waiting to be rescued from peril by a god they don't believe exists. So to them, that makes us fools or worse. That makes us part of the problem.

And there we have the crux of the matter. Are we part of the problem as people of faith or are we part of the solution? What role does faith have as our society, our world, struggles against this tide of rising violence, each attack more senseless than the last? What is our role as followers of Jesus in the response needed if we are to reclaim the life we crave – a life of peace and security and stability? Where is God in all this mess? And that is the real question behind that New York Daily News headline, after all. Where is God in all this mess? The reporter's answer was clear – if there is a God, he/she is not providing the kind of intervention we need so hiding behind God is not acceptable. So, we are left to answer this question for ourselves as people of faith, people who dare to believe in a living, loving God who cares about what happens to each us day in and day out. Where is our God in this mess?

Enter the prophet Micah, and all of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. That is the question prophets are always attempting to answer for the sovereign or ruler they are charged

by God to confront. That is the question they are always attempting to answer for the people too. And in the text we read this morning, we see Micah's answer to this question. Micah gives us a picture of how God is active in our lives through the verbs he chose to paint his picture of a God who acts in history – our history. God teaches us what God needs us to know, if we will listen. God judges how well those who hear the teachings live them into reality. God arbitrates among disputing nations! God arbitrates among disputing nations. Now how about that. How do you suppose that happens? By a deus ex machina kind of event where God descends from on high and just intervenes – pulling up a chair at the conference table with the world's leaders and talking them through their differences to a point of reconciliation? No. God is there, all right, but only if God is invited into the process by the people who are sitting around that table. And dear friends, it only takes one. And even more remarkable, our prayers surrounding those people at those far away conference room tables can and does make a difference. I know it does. Because God loves those people too, whether they know it or not. Whether they care about it or not. Whether they believe it or not. And make no mistake, the choice not to believe in God is as much a “belief” as choosing to believe in God. Atheism or agnosticism is a type of faith for the simple reason that just as no one can “prove” God in the rationalistic way some folks demand, it's just as true

that no one can disprove God either. It is always a choice – to believe or not believe. To have faith or not have faith. To believe this life and the people and circumstances in it are all we have and all we ever will have. That there is no divine energy, no divine connection to the cosmos, no God who is the ground of being, the fountain of love, the wellspring of peace. Believing in the absence of all that is what seems foolish to me, but I respect people’s right to make that choice. But my heart aches for them and all the limits they impose on their lives, however full they seem, without knowing it.

Believing or not believing in God is what defines our framework for living and that’s what Micah is trying to explain in this beautiful text which describes what peace, true peace, God’s peace, will be like if ever we can get our collective human act together and make it happen. When humans find it within themselves to walk the walk of faith in God, trusting that they do not and have never had all the wisdom of the ages in their heads and hearts, that’s when God’s peace becomes possible. That’s when Micah’s beautiful words which are one of the world’s oldest calls for disarmament have a chance to become real: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Wow. Imagine what the world would be like if that actually happened! Micah does. The people “shall

sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and no one shall make them afraid.” No one shall make them afraid. Now that is what peace is supposed to be. That is what it’s supposed to look like. But how do we get there if so much of the world, like the New York Daily News, believes “God Isn’t Fixing This?”

Well, the first step is to recognize, to own that God isn’t going to fix this mess we humans have created through our selfish, me-centered approach to living. God can’t break through this structural sin of power mongering, self-centered bickering which dominates too much of our national and international conversations these days. We have to do that for ourselves, relying on God’s help to do it. Relying on God’s guidance, God’s courage, God’s strength, God’s wisdom to do it. How? By taking what actions we can to show we are willing to walk the walk needed to get us from where we are to the peaceful world God always intended for us. By caring about other people in need, whether we know them or not, whether we think they deserve our help or not. By moving beyond our fear to reach out to friend and stranger alike, showing them what it means to be a Christian by showing them what Christ’s love looks like. By writing to and speaking with our leaders at all levels of government to advocate for laws and actions that will lead to peace instead of more polarization. And, of course, by praying – fervently, consistently, persistently, patiently, hopefully.

And before we conclude our ponderings together this morning, I want to be sure to point out one more thing Micah observes in today's text. It's right there in verse 5: "For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord *our* God, forever and ever." Now that's extraordinary and just possibly the key to the whole thing because Micah is acknowledging that there are many paths of religious faith scattered around the world and ours is but one of those paths. Our God is our God and always will be, and others have their own ways of walking with God – and that's okay. There is no one right way of walking with God that makes all the other ones wrong. There is after all only one God we are walking toward, only one God we are walking with as we make our way through life. So, dear friends, how are you walking the walk with God in your life and why does it matter? And even more importantly, how might your walk with God be a part of the pathway that leads the whole world to the peace God envisions, the peace God promises, the peace God wants for us – His beloved people – and always has? That is the question, isn't it. But not to worry, we'll figure it out together because that's what God needs us to do. Amen.