

When Rights Kiss Peace
Sermon on Psalm 85
Sunday December 7, 2008
Trinity United, Ottawa
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“Rightness and peace will kiss each other.”

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brother [and sister]hood.”

- Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

These hallowed words were drafted by Canadian John Humphrey and proclaimed by the United Nations on December 10th, 1948. This Wednesday, Amnesty International and all who hold human rights dear, will celebrate the 60th Anniversary of this magnificent vision of shalom, that has changed our world.

Amnesty Canada President David Kelleher said recently “This document stands today as humanity’s common understanding about what we want the world to be. It is an incredibly hopeful document and it has had an immense impact on just about every constitution that has been written since 1948.” But this is a vision that we are still called to enact - to work to make ever more real in our world.

The ancient Hebrew Psalm 85 is a corresponding vision of shalom - ‘the things of justice that make for peace.’ It is an oracle of salvation that dreams of a world where everything works the way God intends for Creation. Its images invite and inspire us to reach up to the hallowed place where rights meet peace, where the Holy greets humanity in an intimate mutual embrace. When we live in right relations, God reaches down to hug us shalom, even as we reach up to receive the kiss of peace. The psalm shows us that in the place where justice reigns, the people - and the land - are permeated with divine character. The Christ is reborn.

It is Advent, so we are on our way to greet the Prince of Peace. Today is the Sunday on our journey dedicated to Peace. But as we walk in the pattern of our Advent Labyrinth pilgrimage, moving today from Hope to Peace, we are acutely aware that peace is sometimes near and sometimes farther away. And we need to consciously embody peace on every step of the winding path. To truly celebrate the Christ-mas, we need to walk with divine intent, as God-bearers in our society this season.

Last Sunday we stepped into Advent with Communion, enacting in one significant way, both the Psalm's vision of right relations and the Universal Declaration. Our sharing at Jesus' open table makes manifest our commitment to include all people in equal dignity, without discrimination on the basis of age, race or gender, creed, sexual orientation or ability.

Today at Trinity, we enact our vision of just and right relations with our Festival of Sharing. Aware that our neighbours in the Carlington community often lack for their basic needs, we offer gifts that include clothing and food coupons. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration says "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well being, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services." Our Church in Society focus on addressing poverty and health care issues, takes us a few more steps along that path to true peace.

International Human Rights Day this Wednesday invites us to take another step on the path to Peace. There is an Amnesty case you might choose to strengthen, with your signature. Jelveh Javaheri is an Iranian Women's Rights activist who has been sentenced to six months imprisonment for her peaceful efforts to reclaim the basic human rights that women in Iran have lost since the revolution there.

I'm in the middle of this award-winning book, "Reading Lolita in Tehran," a memoir by English Literature professor Azar Nafisi of her teaching years in Iran. So I feel sensitized to Javaheri's plight. I know many of you have read this amazing book - its been a book club favourite for a couple of years - so you too know what atrocities Iranian women have been subjected to.

Nafisi writes: "Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe...If you're forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank - you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That's what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else - we either plan it or dream it."

When we hear such offensive truth, we are inclined to go somewhere else too. To stop reading or go elsewhere in our minds. When stories of human rights violations like Javaheri's imprisonment and likely torture cross our path, it isn't pleasant. But like the labyrinth, God's path to peace has no turn-offs. No matter if we have difficult encounters along our winding path to Christmas peace, we are called to face them. And to take steps toward the Holy Centre of the vision. Only by insisting on right relations, righteousness, human rights will we reach up with all

our divine strength to receive God's kiss of peace.

Psalm 85 says: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak." So let us listen to that vision:

"Righteousness will go before God and make a path for his steps."

So let us walk our Advent path proclaiming universal human rights, thus making the way, for the Christ who is coming.

Shalom!

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