Walk Towards Peace

Kent Beduhn  
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Texts:

Isaiah 40:1-11  
 Psalm 85  
 Mark 1:1-8  
 2 Peter 3

May you have a peaceful and wonderful Christmas! May you find ways to enrich your capacity to reflect by walking towards peace. May you recognize Jesus in other’s suffering. May you make the path of Christmas – and life – better for others! If you hear nothing else today from me, please hear this.

There’s a remarkable and rich tapestry of Christmas offered by our scriptures: Isaiah 40, Psalm 85, the very beginning of Mark, and 2 Peter 3. I will be drawing images and conclusions from each of these, but I encourage you to allow the scriptures to inform how you walk towards peace today, and throughout the season of Advent.

I am a walker. I have enjoyed walking since childhood, finding Sunday afternoon walks the ultimate antidote to adolescent turmoil. More recently, I began walking in the January - February. 2020, time frame with a new intentionality: to clear my heart and mind for the coming COVID storm. The mental health crisis that followed is something Carol and I rose to fight in our practice, where I saw many more patients than I’ve done before and maintained a steady pace for years. But I needed the walks to provide space and energy for that to happen in. They were a source of refreshing energy and space, but something else began to happen during those walks: I discovered a new practice of prayer and presence, as I cultivated emerging awareness of the Spirit. Other forms of conscious presence came to the fore – I began paying more attention to the flora and fauna, the birds and the creatures everywhere. They were like little movies and adventures I had invited myself into and were alive with an entirely different range of energy than the “storm and stress” of my daily life. There was always something new to see, meditate or contemplate, an adventure of mind, body and spirit. I was being introduced to “peace that passes understanding” in a new way than I had ever experienced. I kept feeling grateful, and nature itself was saying, “You’re welcome. Visit again.” And so I did and do.

Psalm 85 paints an engaging scene, where Steadfast Love and Faithfulness, Righteousness and Peace are like emissaries of God’s presence. I have observed faithfulness spring up from the ground, and righteousness look down from the sky. Have you?

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
 Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
 And righteousness will look down from the sky.  
  
The Lord will give what is good,  
 And our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
 And will make a path for his steps.   
 --Psalm 85: 10-13

Maybe the path that is made for our steps offers an invitation to peace we have not accepted. The path is there, so you may accept the chance to go allow the goodness of the land to yield its increase to you. If you do, righteousness goes before you on your path. In its deeper biblical meaning, righteousness is the quality of “being right in the eyes of God,” including

character (nature),

conscience (attitude),

conduct (action),

and command (word).

Walking with a right nature, right attitude, right action, right word: all of this, the psalmist says, are gifted to us. So, getting out on these walks helped me feel better, but more importantly there was a sense of “rightness” about it, allowing things, and God, to be engaged and met with a fresh perspective, a fresh eye.

“The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.”― Meister Eckhart, [**Sermons of Meister Eckhart**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/19108474)

How do we move towards peace? It seems a hard question these days, when often it’s hard to identify where peace is, or whether it’s even possible. With at least two wars raging, both of which we as America support with weapons, we can feel with carolist, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in “I heard the Bells on Christmas Day”:

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

This was just as true in Jesus’ birthplace of Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem, under occupation by Romans, oppressed, in an un-easy peace. Discord and division have always seemed pervasive and more consequential than peace; peace can seem naïve, irrational and irrelevant to what we really want.

Grief, for example, has a way of cutting into and mocking our peace, as “hate is strong” in many aggressive hearts, minds and souls in our land and world through these difficult days. Our lives and families have grief and loss, year to year, and, whether in aging or changes, it’s hard to welcome them with peace.

I want to address how we walk towards peace in the midst of such turmoil. How can we invite peace through movement as a spiritual practice? When we are anxious, agitated or depressed, peace may mock fears and concerns embedded in our stillness. How may “a path for our steps” be set before us as we walk towards peace in our spiritual practice? How might that reflect the meeting of steadfast love and faithfulness within and around us? We may walk towards peace with righteousness and justice showing up in at least three ways:

* self-examination and attention to shortcomings,
* recognizing how Jesus walks with us on the road of our world’s suffering and is known to us in the breaking of the bread,
* and making the path better for others.

Self-examination and Attention to Shortcomings

Well, this is an “inside job,” your therapist might say to you. How do you “own your stuff?” What’s “inside” gets mirrored back from our “outsides,” so it’s a good cue that when you get negative feedback from those closest to you, pay close attention and let it in. Consider it carefully, do your best to mend the relationship, and notice how you’re trying to defend yourself against the truth or value of what’s being shared with you. The Delphic Oracle of Ancient Greece said it a different way, “Know Thyself,” which was carved over the entrance way to her presence. We are presented a picture of this Wildman, John the Baptist, clothed in camel’s hair, who eats locusts and honey, going through a lot of drama, prophetically calling *all* to confess sins and prepare themselves for the Annointed One to come, the Messiah. People were coming out into the wilderness from Jerusalem to meet this Wildman, confronting them with the presence of God – the presence of the forgiveness of God (hidden in their wrongs and sins) – and another who “was to come,” that he was unworthy of. That would have been a powerful walk, fifteen to twenty miles from Jerusalem to the site of Jesus anointing place by John the Baptist. For those who had confessed, and were baptized by John, consider how different the pilgrimage home was than the pilgrimage out to the Jordan River.

Matthew Fox reminded me in a podcast the other day that Jesus, himself, was an outcast, a child born out of wedlock. Therefore, he was not likely allowed to enter the temple as other Jews on the Sabbath to worship. Fox imagines, I believe rightly, that Jesus may have taken to walking in the wilderness during these times of worship, developing his own personal communion with one he called “Abba,” or Daddy. I imagine that during these times in the wilderness, Jesus was given all the understanding and wisdom about how to be himself in relation to the violence, competing interests and turmoil of human society. Solitude of the wilderness may have given him the steadiness, in the power of personal connection with God, to heal, transform and prepare himself and others with God’s very presence as he was experiencing it there, in the wilderness. There in the wilderness you encounter paradox and mystery, the greatest becoming least, the softness of things like water wearing down the hardest of things like rock, vulnerability overcoming strength, threat meeting serenity and losing its power to control or manipulate, scathing heat yielding to bitter cold.

A funny thing happens when you start to write a sermon about peace. I think I’m doing okay, until my humanity and faults leak through. It’s like the surprise of my off-handed comment I made to Julia last week, after an 8-hour day of completing paperwork, “It would have been good to do more planning.” I was “shoulding” her, in therapy jargon. My careless words, not meeting Julia in her need or understanding that she had already tried to get Bruce’s help in completing all the preparations for his passing, were callous and angry. I was angry with Bruce for leaving her in this bind, with this work. I was angry she was having to do all this. But none of that honored what Julia was doing, and I lost opportunities to support her and encourage. We processed that for probably an hour by text Tuesday morning. All the while, I wanted to be writing my sermon on “walking towards peace,” but instead I was working through how my callous indifference to my daughter’s work and feelings created distance and discord, hurt and perpetuated a pattern of disregard.

A funny thing happens on your way to writing a sermon on walking towards peace. “He just hit me when I was down,” my son said of me. This is sin, wrong I hope to one day be forgiven of. Owning that my expectations, demands, indifference to the feelings of others create such distance, destruction and hurt is difficult but true. These are “threshold moments,” where the essence of each person and even the relationship is being weighed for its worth and value. But this is some measure of what people were leaving Jerusalem and walking out into the wilderness to meet John in order to do: engage the “threshold moment!” to own their sins, confess them boldly, to be washed in the water of forgiveness, to prepare themselves to meet God, or God’s representative, the Anointed One.

Another funny thing happened: About a week after Sito invited me to share the sermon, I walked off the path, literally, and broke my ankle while … listening to a podcast, texting Carol and Julia, and sending the same to them WHILE WALKING! So much for Peter’s encouragement to be “found in peace” while awaiting the coming of Jesus. The message to me was simple: slow down, do one thing at a time, allow your self-examination and your progress to be attentive, intentional and true to one thing. Do the thing you’re doing. Have the thought or feeling you’re having. Stop, look, listen. “Let the eye with which you see God be the Eye through which God sees you.” Let your Being and Doing be present and focused on God, during this Advent. And see if you can stay on the path!

In his writings and sermons, medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), counselled detachment from anything that would separate us from God, whom he understood as the very ground of our being. When you go down, through the darkness of ourselves, our wrongdoings, our sin, you discover, when you face and own what’s there, the generosity and presence of God in forgiveness, and hopefully, in the forgiveness and reconciliation with others. This is a profound and peaceful understanding: the deepest depths of God are given to us as the deepest depths of ourselves. Hidden within the depths is Union that’s already present, waiting to be realized, walked into, and shared.

Meister Eckhardt states:

Whenever you are thwarted, it is your own attitude that is out of order. The outward man is the swinging door; the inner man is the still hinge. The outward work will never be puny if the inward work is great.

So, at the core of our faith and our tradition, before Jesus’ Good News of Jesus even starts, embodied in John the Baptist, is this call to repent/*metanoia*/change your mind, to face the mind-change that allows us grace to view and accept the truth about ourselves and the negative, destructive situation each of us creates from time to time. For this reason, among many others, as many lovers of wisdom (Socrates, Plato, Kierkegaard) have said, “The un-examined life is *not* worth living.” What makes life worth living begins with our capacity and willingness to look at and own our shortcomings and wrong-doing with all the humility we can muster, and then ask for forgiveness through our confession.

When it comes to setting boundaries with difficult family members, that may be helpful at times. Limits and boundaries are good to acknowledge, respect and set. I encourage you, friends, not to make it “once and for all,” where your boundary is a “cut-off.” Leave yourself room to reconsider the relationship, connection and room to exercise your deepest values of truthful confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This means you have the privilege, in walking your life journey, to become smaller, to keep shaving off ego, accomplishments and bragging rights until you are, in Eckhart’s word, “nothing.” “God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction.” (Meister Eckhart, sermon on Romans 8:18). This speaks to a way of meeting God by subtraction, a detachment from the self that allows us to enter the darkness within and pare away anything that is not of God, so that we may discern and land in a ground of our being where God is already flourishing. If this sounds Buddhist, it has been accepted as such by them, relevant to breakthrough to Enlightenment. It’s also deeply Jewish, where the darkest void of Creation contains the seed of the Divine to manifest all that is. It also matches Taoist philosophy, the theology of flow, where in the Dark night of process contains in its essence the movement seed towards the fullest of Light. John the Baptist knew and preached that in the core of our Dark, God’s Light shines brightest.

Seeing Jesus Walk with Us in Suffering

When we confess, remember John 1:

**4**In him [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26050a)] it.

And John 8:

12. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

On the trail, I imagine that Jesus provides the headlamp I wear through darkness. Despite Carol’s concerns of many nights walking in the dark or cold, I reassure her that there’s plenty of light, steady footing, good things to be seen.

The Isaiah 40 passage was written by an author, Deutero-Isaiah, to a people that had been in Exile in Babylon for six years, who had walked away from their covenant with God and sinned and pursued idols so persistently they were punished by Yahweh with exile, the traditional story goes.

God commissions a divine counsel to send a message of consolation, an attempt to comfort Israel after the loss of the relationship with God in Exile. The prophet of Deutero-Isaiah overhears the deliberations of God with the council of gods.

Comfort, comfort my people,  
    says your God.  
**2**Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
    and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
    that her sin has been paid for,  
that she has received from the Lord’s hand  
    double for all her sins.

**3**A voice of one calling:  
“In the wilderness prepare  
    the way for the Lord[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18424a)];  
make straight in the desert  
    a highway for our God.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18424b)]  
**4**Every valley shall be raised up,  
    every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
    the rugged places a plain.

**5**And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
    and all people will see it together.  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

**6**A voice says, “Cry out.”  
    And I said, “What shall I cry?”

“All people are like grass,  
    and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.  
**7**The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
    because the breath of the Lord blows on them.  
    Surely the people are grass.  
**8**The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
    but the word of our God endures forever.”

**9**You who bring good news to Zion,  
    go up on a high mountain.  
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2040%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18430c)]  
    lift up your voice with a shout,  
lift it up, do not be afraid;  
    say to the towns of Judah,  
    “Here is your God!”

**10**See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,  
    and he rules with a mighty arm.  
See, his reward is with him,  
    and his recompense accompanies him.  
**11**He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
    He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
    he gently leads those that have young.

When we walk in the world, are we willing to embrace the suffering we witness in the spirit of consolation, comforting those who have experienced the loss or disappointment? Where do we see the “body broken,” and turn toward those in greatest need? The gifts of community, of the Body of Christ, are so great in this respect. I think of role models and mentors I have watched and seen and walked with over the years. There are little things you remember: How Gordon Cosby would talk urgently about how important it is to sit next to the person in a social setting who looks most out of place, most distant. How Fred Taylor insisted in his last Palm Sunday sermon with us that we must move into participation. He said:

Let’s think about that for a moment.  When we are spectators, the action is out there whether past, present or future.  When you and I are participants, we are drawn into possibility.  Opportunity is given to choose something that empowers us to make a shift or a change, however slight or huge.

If this council of judges Deutero-Isaiah helps us overhear is a hearing we *participate in*, we are at home enough to know every word affects us somehow. We are part of the community who has been in Exile, we are in Exile; we are also a council of gods who are deciding how the people have suffered, should be repaid and given compensation for their sufferings. Jesus’ coming among us is the ultimate consolation, compensation for our sufferings, losses and grief. God and the council insist that we should be “repaid double,” yes, we have limits, falter and fail, “wither and fade like the grass” but we can look to the endurance of God’s word. What form does this comfort ultimately take? The power of God’s Presence: a “reward with him,” an amend or “recompense,” a compensation, for those who suffered a loss or disappointment. And what’s the attitude of the Lord, when we, like God,

tends the flock like a shepherd:  
     gather the lambs in our arms  
and carries them close to our hearts;  
    we gently leads those that have young.

It’s a very tender “threshold moment,” even vulnerable working through of the trauma of the injury suffered.

Jesus lived a life for total transformation and renewal. The intention is different, but some of the stages of healing may be parallel when a psychotherapeutic clinician approaches trauma with Eye Movement Desensitization and Re-integration (EMDR), repair of trauma looks like this:

Stage 1- Safety and Stabilization

Establish personal safety, self-care, tap into inner strengths and resources for healing, learn to regulate ones emotions, learn to manage painful and unwanted thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Stage one is not about discussing and processing of traumatic memories but instead creating a road map and strengthening the person.

Stage 2-Rememberance and Mourning

Review and discuss traumatic memories, process traumatic material to resolution, work through grief and mourn for what was lost in a person’s life due to trauma. With EMDR therapy transform traumatic memories into non-traumatic ones. Build upon positive beliefs of self which spontaneously occur in the healing process and which emerge during this stage.

Stage 3- Re-connection and Integration

Build upon newly emerging positive healthy beliefs of self. Imagine experiencing life in a new way including connecting with others and engaging in meaningful activities and life experiences.

EMDR therapy is a effective and rapid method for healing from distressing memories and traumatic events. People do not have to live in pain and feel that their life has been ruined. There is help, healing and peace.

<https://vancouveremdrtherapy.com/3-stages-trauma-recovery/>

We participate directly in this care, this tenderness and reconciliation with the person’s memory and experience of suffering. This is the quality of experience evoked in Isaiah, with God’s connection and received reward, our amends, “twice over.”

Making the Path Better for Others

It’s something I do every time I go out walking: I clean up the trail, remove and recycle trash, move branches or impediments, if possible. Every time. There are so many ways we are doing that right now in our walk with the Lord, inside and out, as we practice in community. The Walk’s not done for health, or show, or weight loss, but for God’s glory, for the celebration of the path the prayer. None of the walking that I log on my watch or phone, none of the workouts would mean anything if they weren’t accompanied with prayerful presence, looking at where I find God in images of transcendence.

Some simple guidelines for “Making the Path Better,”

* Get on the path. Walk upright, head up and shoulders back.
* Open to your immediate experience with gratitude.
* Invite others to walk with you.
* Invite Jesus to walk with you (or carry you).
* Imagine all of your senses to be receiving your surroundings as God receives you. Your eyes are God’s eyes, your ears God’s ears.
* Breathe naturally and fully, because your Spirit depends on it.
* Notice mantras arise and subside with the breath. (In—"Light”, Out—“One”; In—“Spirit,” Out—“Presence”, phrases of scripture”; In—“"Word made flesh,” Out—“Dwelling among us”, etc.)
* Clear the path for those who follow.
* Thanks and praise to God for the Path, the Presence, gift of the Walk.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, when he penned “I heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” had just received news that his eldest son was wounded and likely paralyzed in the Civil War. This is the son he had denied permission to enlist, and who had enlisted anyway. So, this single father of 6 children, reaching for some meaning in Christmas, continued to reflect on the bells tolling in Christmas Day:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

This Christmas, allow the Path, the Presence and the Walk guide you to the birth of Jesus within your very self. Blessings on the Walk towards Peace.