

Reflection 6th Dec 2020

Advent 2: Peace

Isa 40:1–11

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My eight and five-year-old children are waiting for Christmas eagerly. I am sure you know why. When they realised it was a special day a couple of years ago, they began to wait for Christmas for a reason. That reason is gifts. They knew they could have gifts on that day. That's why they are eagerly waiting for and even counting days to go. As a Christian parent, there was a dilemma. Because somehow, they heard their gifts come from Santa Claus. Then, they kept asking when Santa would give gifts and what Santa would give to them. My wife and I didn't want to break their fairy-tale world, but we also didn't want to give Santa all spotlight instead of Christ. So, we explained to them. Well, the gifts are coming from Jesus. Jesus is like a protagonist of Christmas, and Santa is just delivering the gifts for him like a postman. See! Santa is wearing a red coat. It's the same as a post-box.

We are waiting for Christmas 2020, and we have four Sundays of Advent this time. Advent guides us to explore what Christmas means to us and to discover what the greatest gifts we can receive from God. These gifts are also what we can give to our family, friends, and the world. I believe that Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love are the biggest gifts that God wants to give us, and these are the most meaningful gifts that we can give to others.

Today, we remember 'peace'. Let's look at the reading, the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is quite a big book. It has 66 chapters. Do you know how many books in the whole Bible? Yes, 66 books: 39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament. Same 66. So, I remember the numbers like this 3 multiply 9 equals 27. Then, 39 plus 27 is 66. (3x9=27)

Interestingly, Isaiah also can be divided as the same as the Bible. Isaiah is normally considered as a collection of 2 or 3 writings. The first 39 chapters are called the first Isaiah. This part mainly speaks of God's judgement. But the second Isaiah turns its voice to speak about the good news; God's promise of redemption from exile and words of hope for an exiled people. That's why the book of Isaiah is regarded as a thumbnail of the Bible. As the fortieth book of the Bible begins to say about good news, the fortieth chapter of the book of Isaiah starts about something different from the previous chapters, and the first word is 'comfort'.

“Comfort, comfort my people.”

This word is about tenderness after a very long and dark night of judgment. It means the restoration of hope to God's relationship with Israel. 'Comfort', this is a state of being that God wants to give and wants us to be. God wants to start a new relationship with us as God intended from the beginning. The word 'comfort' is similar to

the εὐαγγέλιον (euaggelion) in the New Testament. There was the sin of people, so it caused wrath and judgement. The Israel people deserved to be exiled. But the unexpected good news is proclaimed. Then, they are about to receive comfort. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, the good news of Advent is that God comes to reconcile and to heal and to restore all people, along with all creation, which is peace with God. Peace between God and all creation. Then the passage leads to the prophecy of the way of the Lord coming.

What is your image of peace? No conflict, no war, no pain, no suffering or no challenge? As a full-time student especially speaking English as a second language, I often feel no peace/no comfort when I am facing assignments' due dates. So, I tend to think I can have ultimate peace when I can escape from the dues one day. Moreover, around March and April this year, our family were sick, tested covid-19 and isolated. My college and my field church here were closed. Even, one day, when the virus was getting worse, a man on a street suddenly asked me where I was from and talked to me before my answer: Chinese? Vietnamese? Korean? He didn't say why he asked, but I could guess why. I lost my comfort. I lost my peace because I felt alienated in the land, I am living in.

But the Isaiah reading gives us different images to understand peace. One is the image of a king. God is coming to sovereign with power. God rules with a mighty arm. The other one is the image of a shepherd. God tends the flock and gathers the lambs in arms and carries them close to a heart. God protects us and provides our needs. Even though we are in the midst of difficult and suffering situations, God's peace is still valid. Interesting is that both images of God depict God's arms. God uses God's hands to protect and care. God holds us in God's arms. Peace is that no matter who we are, what we do, or where we are, we can stay in God's arms. When we let ourselves go to God's hands, we can come into God's peace that the world cannot give and cannot understand. That's why Isaiah could speak of God's coming like a shepherd.

Why is this image of hugging important for us today? Because this is what we miss the most nowadays. We are still in lockdown within 2 square metres. We can't touch, we can't shake hands, and we can't give a hug. But we know when we hug, sharing the sound of our heartbeat with each other, we can feel intimacy in our relationship.

A hug will give us a great sense of peace in our relationship with God. Based on healthline.com, there are some benefits of hugging. 1) hugs reduce stress 2) hugs may protect us against illness 3) hugs may boost heart health 4) hugs can make us happier 5) hugs help reduce our fears 6) hugs may help reduce pain 7) hugs help us communicate with others

Family therapist Virginia Satir once said, "We need four hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth." Yes, it sounds like a lot of hugs we need. It seems right that many hugs are better than not enough.

However, don't be disappointed that we can't hug physically at the moment. Even we can't see God's arms physically; we can stay in the presence of God's hands. We can give a hug to others in other ways. They can be loving gifts like the Christmas bowl, can be words of affirmation, loving acts of service, or having quality time.

Just use your love languages. That's the ways to send God's peace to the world through us. This is the way to declare to the world, "Here is your God!"

Advent is a special time of year for us. It is not the season of the hustle and bustle and pushing and shoving of the pre-Christmas buying. When we remember the peace of divine embrace, when we enact the hug of peace to others, Advent and Christmas can be a more special time of year. It's God's peace on earth that is the promise and gift of Advent. It's God's good news for everyone to get a warm hug from God and other people at Christmas.

Amen.