

ISAIAH 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

PSALM 34:1-14

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

2 My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.

3 O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.

5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.

6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.

7 The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

9 O fear the Lord, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.

10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?

13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.

14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

SERMON

Throughout this season of Advent, we're going to be exploring the topic of "peace" together. And just like I mentioned in the time with the kids earlier today, "peace" is a pretty big word in the Bible. Last night John and I were talking about peace, and had the rather apt

observation that peace has to be pretty big, it has to be bigger than simply not being a jerk. Although, not to throw John under the bus here, but he may have used a different word.

And it's true, right? Peace is far more than simply don't be a jerk. And it's a lot more than even "be a nice person." Peace isn't just getting along with other people, it's something deeper. In the Hebrew Bible the word for peace is "shalom." That's still the word for peace in Hebrew, today. And Shalom is a good place for us to start. As I told the kids, shalom is probably best translated to mean something like peace and wholeness. It's a feeling of being at ease, comfortable, complete, and without need. Like you're where your supposed to be, doing what you're supposed to be doing, with the people you should be with, and there's nothing you would change. In this season of Advent, as we wait together for our Prince of Peace who is coming into the world, we're going to spend a few weeks dwelling in this theme of peace and wholeness. What does it mean to be peacemakers in this world? How can we be a church community who promotes peace? What about within our own hearts? Today, our scripture, Psalm 34, has some advice for us on how to bring shalom into our own, individual lives. And the advice of Psalm 34 is really two pronged, and it has to do with our words and our actions.

Listen to these latter verses, "11 Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. 12 Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? 13 Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. 14 Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." That's as good a place to start as any, so let's start with that first part. If we desire life and covet many days

to enjoy good, we should keep our tongues from evil, and our lips from speaking deceit. Well, easier said than done, right? But it is an important point: something about being people of peace, bringing wholeness to ourselves, worshipping the prince of peace, it starts with how we speak.

Words are incredibly powerful. The things we say to one another, the things we say to ourselves, even those words that only exist in the quiet of our own minds, they change the way we live and work and interact with this world around us. The stories we tell, the truths and lies we spin, the commentary we share, all of those words shape the way we see the world and how others perceive us.

One of my colleagues in the Presbytery, she and her husband bought a big, beautiful old home in Indian Village, right in the heart of Detroit. They're working through the very slow process of refinishing the home, room by room, to its original glory. One of their first projects was to take off the horrible façade someone had placed over the original wood and brick work fireplace in the formal living room. The original work is stunning, and once they touched it up the dark wood was polished and shiny, the bricks look sturdy. It's sort of everything you hope a craftsman hearth will be. But the best part about the whole thing is what they found when they removed the façade. Across the original solid, walnut mantle words were decoratively carved in. They read "Good friend, around these hearthstones speak no evil word of any creature." It's probably my favorite mantle in the whole world. What a treasure!

So, their home is enormous, and they frequently open it up for meetings and other church events. I've been there a number of

times for various presbytery meetings, and often we'll gather in that formal living room. The mantle, especially now that it's cleaned, dusted, and freshly polished, those words sort of stand watch over the space. Whenever I've met there, those words seem to shape the space around them. "Speak no evil word of any creature." There's a sort of magic to them, and call me crazy, but it almost seems as if the meetings I've had in that space are a bit more civil, more thoughtful, and perhaps, just a bit, more peaceful. The words we speak, the words we share, the words we cherish, they're powerful, they have the ability to create or destroy peace and wholeness in ourselves and the world around us.

Now, alongside this admonition to be cautious about the words we use, there's a second recommendation in this psalm: depart from evil, do good, seek peace, pursue it. I've printed those words for the front of your bulletin, today. Throughout Advent, I'll be making bulletin covers with words to remember on them. I'd encourage you to take them home, cut out the square on the front, and put it up somewhere you'll see it. Like that mantle, let the words live in your space and be a reminder to you. So, what do these words mean? Again, easier said than done. Essentially, walk away from that which is evil, do whatever is good, look for peace in your midst, and put your energy toward finding it. Surround yourselves with people and experiences that promote wholeness.

Just like the words that are spoken, we're so shaped by the people and experiences of our day to day living. I'm sort of learning this lesson in a visceral way right now, as a parent of a preschooler. John and I have worked really hard to raise our children to be kind and thoughtful with their words and actions. We're careful about the

things we say, the tv shows we let them watch, the books we read, and the toys we play with. And things were honestly chugging along just fine until Enoch went to preschool. Once Enoch was in preschool, it became wildly apparent that there's only so much influence John and I can have on him as his parents. Not to say that our work as parents is unimportant, not at all, but we're no longer the only voices he hears. Enoch is surrounded with other kids at school, and sometimes those kids say funny, silly, slightly naughty things that he picks up on. In the past few weeks, I suspect as Christmas has become a greater thing, one of the choice preschool taunts these days is the term "buttcracker" rather than "nutcracker."

Enoch's words, actions, and thoughts about the world are being shaped by the other students around him. And, lest you think I'm waxing poetic about my perfect son, guess who came right home and taught his little brother all sorts of new, exciting, and slightly naughty words and actions? And guess which little brother has now carried all of those same teasing games and words, like a virus, into the toddler room at school? Yep. That would be my sweet Moses, teaching the other 2 year olds the word "butt cracker." It's a proud parenting moment.

Preschool is sort of a silly example, of course, but you all know this to be true. We are shaped by the people and experiences we surround ourselves with. The newspaper we read will likely shape our political worldview. The friends we have will have an impact on our interests. Our children may influence our hobbies, or lack thereof. And so this advice of Psalm 34 is appropriate: in our own lives, if we seek to be people of peace and wholeness we should depart from the influences which are evil, so that we can have space

and energy to do good. We should follow after the things that we find promote wholeness and peace, pursuing those things that make us feel and act as whole, peaceful people.

And so, it's all much easier said than done, but in this season as we wait for the advent of our prince of peace, let's live as people of peace, whole people. Let's be thoughtful with the words we speak to one another, that they would weave a world around us built out of kindness, compassion, and light. Let's be intentional about seeking stories and influences who will promote and normalize peace. Let peace prevail on earth, and let us all remember that it most certainly begins with each one of us. Thanks be to the price of peace.