

Liturgy is a set of practices that we do every single week. We read scripture, we preach, we pray, we sing, all those things. The word means the work of the people. So it isn't that you are coming to consume a service. You're participating in it. In a small way, the standing, the sitting, the reciting of prayers, and the responsive pieces of the service are contributing. All together, we are putting on this worship service for the Lord. And so there's just a little bit of why we stand in reverence of the scripture. And it's symbolic of the scriptures being above all of us. All of us are in submission to the Word of God.

This is week two of the Advent season. Advent in the church calendar is actually the beginning of the church calendar. So, Happy New Year in some ways. This is week two of the church calendar in which we celebrate the waiting for God. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means arrival or coming. I find it fascinating that the church calendar actually begins with us waiting. Not with us doing something, not with us active, but actually waiting for the arrival of Jesus.

In Advent, we celebrate three different arrivals. We first reflect on his birth in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. We reflect on this idea that Jesus has come. Secondly, we look forward to his second coming. When Jesus will come to restore all things, to judge the living and the dead, to have the resurrection of all people. We anticipate with an eye over the horizon, looking out in hope for Jesus' second coming. So Jesus has come, Jesus will come, and then the third arrival that we celebrate in Advent is the presence of God in your daily living. It's the idea that we, as believers, as followers of Jesus, have, through the Holy Spirit, the arrival of Jesus' presence in our life here and now. Jesus has come, Jesus will come, and there's a sense in which Jesus is here, and we celebrate that.

The good news of Advent, as I heard one pastor say this week, is not that we are faithful in our waiting because we often are not. But it's that God is faithful in his coming. That Jesus will, in fact, come again. He did come at one point and is present daily with the believers here and now.

This morning we reflect on the Advent of peace. The second theme of Advent. Last week, Brandon did a great job preaching on the Advent of hope. And this morning we look at this concept of peace. Peace, if we're honest, is a bit of a complicated topic, particularly in our day and age. I think of the world we live in now. I think of two wars raging around the world. I think of the

discourse and the pain and the hurt that seems to be just hovering beneath the surface.

This season has a tendency to bring great joy but also great pain. It brings forth emotions from within us of the strife and brokenness of the world around us, which we seem to feel a little more acutely. I remember a couple of years ago, my oldest daughter, Madison, came to me and was distressed. She was crying out of nowhere. I asked her what was going on? What's happening? It was close to Christmas, and it was when the pandemic was raging. Certainly enough news had been on in the house where she sensed the tension in the world.

She said, "I can't imagine how we can celebrate Christmas with all this pain going on in the world." Madison, now 12, was nine or ten back then. She had this soft, sensitive heart in which she was discerning that the world was utterly broken. She was feeling the weight of that pain and she had these questions that were very human questions.

God, where are you? Why, God, is this all happening? How can we celebrate the light when it seems so dark? She continued to tell me how it felt like Christmas was some silly veneer that just tries to cover up the darkness for a season to numb the pain before we can actually get through it and have to deal with it on the other side.

It was an interesting time because I got to tell her of Christmas, and she has a preacher as a dad, which is unfortunate for her at times because I got to preach Advent. I got to preach Christmas to her. I began to preach and tell her a little bit about the world at the time of Jesus' arrival, which was anything but peaceful.

If anything, darkness was, in fact, settling in. Advent is not a silly veneer to cover the pain, to cover the strife, but it's actually the reminder that light enters into the darkness to expel it from within. It isn't that we numb the pain. Advent is the season when we look directly at the pain and the brokenness of the world, and remember that it isn't the end of the story. Jesus is, in fact, arriving. He's coming in to this place.

See, if we think the Advent season is just lights and glamour and this veneer-type thing, which again, there's a season to celebrate the beauty of that, which is Christmastime. But don't miss this edge to it. To celebrate peace is to also recognize something like strife and brokenness. The reality is that this what we celebrate in Advent. You see, at Advent, the world was anything but peaceful. I mean, just think of the words of Mary in that beautiful poem that explodes from her lips when she hears she's going to be the

mother of God. She begins in what's called the Magnificat and she cries out things like,

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He's brought down rulers from their thrones. He's lifted up the humble. He's filled the hungry with good things. He sent the rich away empty."

Mary has this song that almost explodes out of her in the midst of the brokenness because she recognizes the arrival of the Prince of Peace. You don't talk about rulers falling from their thrones if they were just rulers. You don't talk about the hungry being filled if everyone is filled. The world was a dark and broken place at the time of Jesus and that's the point of what we celebrate, to celebrate peace, the arrival. The Advent of peace is to celebrate that God is entering into our strife, entering into the brokenness. Advent is very much that season.

In 1943, just a year and a half before the pastor, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazi regime, he penned these words from prison. Advent had descended on this prison cell, and he was reflecting on this time. Obviously, it's a dark season, and he writes these words to his fiancée.

We shall ponder the incomprehensibility of our lot and be assailed by the question of why, over and above the darkness already enshrouding humanity, we should be subjected to the bitter anguish of a separation whose purpose we fail to understand. And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives. Bonhoeffer, 1943

Advent, the Christmas hope, is in the midst of a prison cell, arrested unjustly by the Nazi regime; hope is there. God is in the manger. This Advent of peace is about the recognition of the strife you and I experience. That peace is undoing those strongholds. It seems like it has a hold on the world, but peace is entering into the story and beginning to untangle it. God is in the manger. It's this profound reality that we are working out some 2,000 years later, the impact of what that means.

My main idea is simple. The Advent of peace is the undoing of strife. The Advent of peace is the undoing of strife because you and I experience strife. I've spoken about it already, but there are two expressions of it that are worth naming. The first is external strife. This is the one we're a little more familiar with. This is those circumstances that are around us. It's situational.

It's circumstantial. It's a war in Ukraine, a war in the Holy Land. It's cancer. It's a diagnosis. It's these things that are coming on to us. The Advent of peace is about Jesus entering into that brokenness and bringing healing to those circumstances, reconciling all things to himself. So there is this external strife, and some of you may be experiencing that.

I've been a pastor long enough to know that in a room this size, there are many hurts that you bring in. Maybe it's the first holiday season without a loved one. Maybe it's the loss of a job and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. Maybe it's relational or marital struggles. Maybe it's something that seems so out of your control that you feel almost helpless. This is the external strife that we all feel at times.

The second strife is similar, yet different. It's the internal strife. It's the strife often how we cope with the external strife. We turn to addictions. We turn to depression or grief or something that feels like there's a darkness that doesn't come from outside but rather from in. You're riddled with questions and doubts. God, how can I celebrate Christmas? How can I celebrate the light in the midst of this darkness? There's an internal strife that we experience.

Whether it's external or internal, the Advent story is trying to answer these questions: does God exist? Is God good? Where are you God? These are the Advent questions that when we come to our text in Psalm 4, we find a meditation on this tension between strife and peace. My invitation this morning is for us to reflect on what it means that the Prince of Peace has, in fact, come.

Psalm 4 is a short psalm, just eight verses, and you see it break down into three clear categories. Verses 1 and 2 talk about the cries of the anguished. Verses 3 through 6 talks about the actions of the godly. And verses 7 and 8 talk about the comfort of God. So, let's work through the text.

Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer" (v. 1). This opening verse is addressed to God. It's the familiar questions that you've asked. God, where are you? Answer me. Give me relief. And it says that it's due to this idea of distress. The Hebrew word for distress here has this idea of being narrow or tight. Think of the imagery of being squeezed. That's the imagery that David has written into this psalm.

He's saying, in my squeezedness, when life is pressing in on me, answer me when I call. And then he says to give him relief, or relieve me, or hear me when I cry out in prayer. Very human responses to situations where we feel squeezed. You and I have felt this. You and I have been in those places, those narrow-type places where you're not sure where exactly the answer is to come, and you're crying out to God, "Answer me, relieve me, hear me."

But I love that in the middle of this, David adds this little address to God that says, "My righteous God." I love this because there's a sense that in the midst of his squeezedness, his distress, he's still proclaiming the very characteristics of God. And in some sense, he's appealing to God on God's own terms: My righteous God. God who is good and just. There's this little glimmer of faith in the midst of all of this tension that he seems to be experiencing. He says, "Answer me, God, my righteous God."

The voice shifts a little bit in verse 2. We think he's actually talking to some of the other fellow leaders of Israel, but the voice shifts. So, verse 1 addresses God; verse 2 addresses those who are in distress with him.

"How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?" (v. 2). He looks at the situation and says, "How long will you turn glory into shame?" There's a sense in which David is trying to lead well as the leader of God's people. The way they're responding to this distress is taking glory and turning it to shame, and then he identifies two areas in which it's taking place. "How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?"

Now, this word delusion could also be translated as worthlessness. Alright, so how long will you love worthless things, delusions, things that don't have a foundation in reality? And it's interesting because there's a connection between distressing situations and our propensity to pull on something that is untrue. Have you sensed that before?

In those distressing situations, you experience a lack of control where it doesn't seem like you know exactly how to contain the situation or the circumstance that you're in. And so you have a greater propensity for delusions. Because delusions, those lies, those things that aren't based in reality, give you a false sense of control. The delusion may be God must be distant. He must hate me. There's a sense in which that delusion, that lie that you know isn't true of God, but it makes sense of the situation. And so we hold to these delusions because they give us a sense of control.

But the reality is life is often not in our control. More often than not, it isn't. It's a lesson I find myself learning over and over in parenting and in leadership and in all the vast aspects of my life. I am far less in control than I would like. But yet, I often think I am, and that's a delusion. I hold on to things. I control and distort other people as an expression in which I'm trying to control a situation that ultimately is for God's handling, not my own. David says, how long will you love delusions? How long will you succumb to false beliefs about reality? Because when we hold on to those things, there are devastating effects. When we can't look at reality and trust God with who he is in the midst of that. How long will you fall for delusions?

Then he goes to the second thing, he says, not just how long will you love delusions, but how long will you seek false gods? And

see, here again, is the counter to it. Here's one of the ways you cope with the delusions or the loss of control: you turn to things, gods that feel like they're going to satisfy. We worship at the altar of these false gods because they offer a cheap alternative to who God truly is. This season is filled with false gods that will sell you a gospel. Just purchase this thing and it will satisfy the deepest ache of your heart. If your family was just this perfect and you had this experience, this dinner, this whatever, then life will be good. If you just got that end of the year bonus and this raise, then your life will be satisfied.

These false gods offer cheap alternatives to what's the deepest longing of your heart. They always over-promise and under-deliver, and yet we find ourselves over and over succumbing to them. And David says, how long will you love these delusions and these false gods?

Church, it's a good question for you and me. It's a good question for us to ask. How long will we succumb to these delusions? What are the delusions you're believing? Do you believe you're in control of your destiny, or do you believe that God is the one who's ultimately in control? Do you believe God is bad and distant and far removed and cares little for you? What are the delusions that you're buying into? What are the false gods of success, pleasure, control, or status? What are the things you turn to satisfy that ache?

"Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself the Lord hears when I call to him" (v. 3). Know that the Lord has not turned a blank eye or a cold shoulder on the people of God. He says, know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant. David is alluding to how, in moments of strife, when you're reaching for those delusions, those false gods, the answer is that God has set you apart for him. That is where you find satisfaction. We'll get to that in a little bit when we talk about peace. But the reality is what your heart longs for is not that false God, but it's for your heart to find rest in the very presence of God. That is what your heart longs for.

David says, don't stress about it because God has set his faithful servant aside for himself. The Lord hears when we call to him. Whatever you're going through, whatever strife you're experiencing, you can rest secure in the presence of God. You may not feel it, you may not feel like God is there, but our feelings are fleeting. Often, at times, they align with reality, and at times they're delusions. So, we root ourselves in something deeper. A story in which, like Advent, God enters into the brokenness. He comes into the darkness and we remember that story because it's in that story that we know God is here. Jesus is present. We can rest secure in that.

David unpacks how to respond to this. *"Tremble and do not sin;" (v. 4a).* See, this idea of trembling is the idea of agitation or stirred up or shaking in fear. And he says, in the midst of all that, you're going to experience that. When you lose a loved one, it will shake

you. When you lose that job, that security you thought you had, it will stir your heart. It will move you in ways that bring about an unknown. And he says, tremble, that's okay, but do not sin. Don't turn to the delusions.

We can have a flat understanding of sin. We tend to think of sin, and it is this, so hear me correctly here, as a moral wrong. But it's also, at times, a coping mechanism for the brokenness of the world. And so yes, we don't want to sin because God is worthy of our holy living. But also God doesn't want us to sin because he knows what's best for us. And it's when we turn in that distress to that brokenness. When we're trembling and turning to those cheap alternatives, it leads to a spiral away from the very direction that would heal our heart, which is in God.

So David says, tremble, that's okay. Life will do that to you. But don't sin. Don't go in a direction counter to God because that's not what your heart most longs for. He says,

Tremble and do not sin. And then he gives this analogy, when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord. vv. 4b-5

What David's getting at is the security and the rest. Much of the work we do to walk through and hold to the peace of God in moments of distress actually happens far earlier than when the moment of distress happens. It happens when things are settled and you're going about your discipleship to Jesus. You're working out what it means to walk patiently with him so that when that situation comes, you may tremble; you may be rattled, but you have a foundation, a relational understanding of God, a connection to God in which to walk through that.

David says to search your hearts and be silent. I love that imagery of searching our hearts. There's an intentionality to it. It's finding the corners of your heart, the core areas of your being where you have a propensity for delusions, for false gods. You have a propensity to stray and pull away into things that are other than God. And so David says, search your hearts and then be silent.

Isn't that interesting? We talked over a year ago about silence before God. We talked about what it means to sit just before the Lord, allowing God to love you, not for what you do, but for just showing up and turning your attentiveness to God. One of the things I've been learning in my silence practice is the idea of control. To sit silent before God is fundamentally to release any control you have because you're just there. No one's watching. No one's provoking you. You're just silent, allowing God to love you. And for many of us, it's a fearful place to be.

When you are silent, all the muck that's in your heart comes to the surface. When you slow down, you find the pains, hurts, sins, and addictions, all those things that you've suppressed with busyness, noise, delusions, and false gods. But when you come silent before God, whether you want to or not, you're going to

search your heart. Because it is there before God. But what I've also found in my practice with silence is that when I do that work, and I allow God to love me in the midst of that, it is a profound transformative work where I sit before God, drawing my attention and affection towards him.

I realize all the delusions that I thought about; God must not love me because of this. God, why am I here? Where are you? I find God loving me tenderly and carefully in the midst of all of my brokenness and slowly working that out. That's why David, in verse 5, says, "Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord."

It's encouraging. You continue in your habits, the practices that are drawing your heart back to God. He says, offer the sacrifices of the righteous, and trust in the Lord in the midst of all of that. See, silence is a place of great submission, where you submit yourself before God. You allow the facades and the veneers that we cultivate to disappear, and you get stripped down to your bare essence where you're just sitting before God in your raw, unfiltered self. Tremble and do not sin. Search your hearts and be silent. David is trusting in the Lord in the midst of all of that distress.

I'm reminded of his words in Psalm 46:10. "*Be still and know that I am God.*" Be still. Church. What would it look like this Advent season for you to be still? It's a hard one. Christmas is two weeks away. It's only going to get busier. And I just wonder if you can cultivate space and time to sit in the mystery that God is in the manger.

Could you imagine just that life will go on and you'll miss it. You'll miss the profound beauty that God entered into the story. The peace, the strife, the unsettledness that you experience. Don't miss that God is wanting to enter that. Begin to undo it. Begin to knit your heart back to him.

Next we see the psalm beginning to turn towards the comfort of God. "*Many, Lord, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound"* (vv. 6-7). David says, once you've sat in that, once you've been silent, you've allowed your heart to be exposed in all those broken areas, who will then bring us that prosperity? How will we live well? What will life look like on the other side of that? He says, Let the light of your face, your countenance, turn to you. God, may you turn your face towards us. And then fill my heart with joy when the grain and new wine abound.

David is imagining at a harvest time when the grain is plenty, and the wine is flowing. And he says, when all of that joy is taking place, God, fill my heart with that joy. That joy that surpasses even that. It's a good prayer for Advent. Lord, fill my heart with joy. In the midst of the distress, the squeezing, the tension, fill my heart with joy.

Shalom

Then we arrive where the whole psalm has been pointing towards. *"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety"* (v. 8). See, everything has been pointing towards verse 8. The strife, the tension, the searching of the heart, all of these things that David is trying to pull together to understand where he stands. He says, Lord, in peace, I lie down and sleep.

Now, the word peace is the word shalom. Most of you may be familiar with the word shalom, but in Hebrew, it has far more than just the meaning than the absence of conflict. In the English language, we hear peace, and we tend to just think of a lack of conflict, no strife. But in the biblical imagination, this idea of shalom is much more robust. It has to do with fullness, completeness, or harmony. It's everything in the world operating in the way it was intended.

The imagery I always use is, when you go to a symphony and you hear the band all tuning their instruments? Then the conductor gets up and taps the little wand, waves it, and they all start tuning together. That moment when they tune their instruments together, that's shalom. It's where all the dissonance of earlier, when they were tuning, they're all playing differently, and you hear the chaos, and then they come together. It's Madison asking how we can celebrate Christmas. And then Christmas comes, and you remember the story, and the conductor waves the wand, and the sound all harmonizes to get that shalom.

It's when your soul finds rest, he says, in peace, in shalom, I lay down and sleep. Is there anything more vulnerable than sleep? You ever thought about that? Is there anything more vulnerable than closing your eyes and drifting off, and you have zero control over what's happening? You're just sleeping. But is that not what your soul longs for? To rest, to sleep. And David says it is in peace, in shalom, in that wholeness I will lie down and sleep. For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. See, the reality of shalom is that it's not the absence of conflict, but it's actually the presence of something greater. And what we know from scripture is that it's not just the absence of conflict, but it's the presence of Jesus.

Because as David unpacks here, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. Peace is not some ethereal thing. It's the absence of conflict but the presence of Jesus. And it's in the presence of Jesus that we find that shalom, that resting state. This is what the whole psalm has been pointing toward, what Advent reminds us of. If our hearts and our souls need to find that rest, we don't just escape from the conflict, we rather, in the midst of the distress, allow the presence of God, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us to dwell in the midst of our life, in the midst of our very souls. It is that presence that we find our rest. Peace is not the absence of conflict, but it is the presence of Jesus. This is what your heart longs for. This is that unsettledness. This is what it's been aching for.

God Hears Your Cry

As we close, there are two things I want you to remember. First, that in the midst of your strife, God hears your cry. He is not distant. He is not removed. That is so evident in these words of David. He's crying out in distress right in the midst of it. And God hears. This is the story from Genesis to Revelation. It's the very reason we celebrate Christmas. God heard the cries of a people who were oppressed by the Roman Empire, who felt distant and that God wasn't there. It seemed like things were not going as planned. Yet, God is here. Emmanuel. God is with us. He hears your cry.

God Is Your Peace

Secondly, it's that not only does God hear your cry, but it's that God is your peace. Not that thing, not that experience, not that promotion, not that delusion or false God, but God is your peace. The very presence of God is the peace your heart longs for. Here's just a quick look of just a few New Testament verses that came to mind when I thought about this idea of peace and God being our peace.

We heard this morning during the Advent reading, John 14. Jesus is speaking, *"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."* Acts 10, the church preaching the good news says the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. Romans 5 says we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2, he himself is our peace. Colossians 1:20, which I read at the opening of the service. We are being made peaceful through Jesus' blood.

God is our peace, church. And as we reflect on that, we are leaning into the reality that we cannot find peace outside of those ways. That Christmas without the reflection of God being incarnate, of God in the manger, is easily turned to a cheap veneer that numbs the pain. But what happens is December 26 comes. The hope you had that maybe this Christmas it'll feel different, and you wake up, and it's like that long drive home from Disneyland. It's a bit disappointing.

But what if this year you carved out time to search your heart, to sit in silence before the Lord, to reflect on all the implications of God incarnate? God in the manger. And you began to sit before the Lord and say, "God, I've been searching for peace in so many other places, but it's only in you that I will find peace."

You may wake up December 26 and it may still feel like the circumstances are bearing down on you. David wrote Psalm 4 in the midst of the squeeziness. God never promises that he'll flip the switch and take those situations away, but God does promise that he will be with you in the midst of them.

You know, as a pastor, one of the great gifts of my work is I get to enter into your lives in places where you're feeling that distress. You're feeling that pain and that brokenness. That is a stunning honor that I get to walk in that season with you. What I always

have to refrain from is wanting to just say that everything is going to be okay because I don't know that.

But what I can do in the work that we as pastors do is enter in. And in some way, we just mirror the work of Jesus in the world and say God is present. God is here. We pray with you, and we walk with you, and we're pointing out that God is here. God is here because, at times, in distress, we need that reminder. Where is God? Church, Advent is the reminder that God is present. God is here.

I want to read a prayer that also came out of the 1940s. As we reflected on Bonhoeffer to open the sermon, I want to close with a different thinker, a different pastor, and a theologian by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was writing in response to the Second World War, and much of his theology, much of his work, was trying to make sense of a broken world. He penned this prayer that you'll be fairly familiar with. It's a prayer that the recovery community has used often called the *Serenity Prayer*. I want to read this prayer because it reminds me of what it means to be settled in peace in the midst of distress. Niebuhr knew distress. He was right in the midst of a broken world. I want to read the *Serenity Prayer* in its entirety, which is a little more of a full expression of it.

I want us to pray these over us with a new look at it through the lens of Advent, through the lens of peace undoing strife.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can. And wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time. Accepting hardships is the pathway to peace. Taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will. So that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with him forever and ever in the next.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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