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Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

The Second Sunday of Advent often focuses on peace: peace in the midst of warfare, violence, chaos, discombobulation, and gross injustice. Just as hope was juxtaposed with wilderness for Advent 1, peace becomes something carved out of the wilderness in the texts for this week. A service that allows worshipers to begin to connect the coming of Jesus into this world with our responsibility to participate in making straight the path will do the important work of making relevant what Jesus says about money, possessions, and bodies. More importantly, a service that allows worshipers to name the wilderness of those who are impoverished as one through which we are called to make straight paths will do the important work of connecting Sunday's worship to the tax reform debate.

We offer this reminder each week because it matters: This word "impoverished" is not used by accident – it indicates that people are made poor, rather than just show up poor. This is a loaded idea, because if people are made poor, one must ask what makes them poor. A congregation that is not yet accustomed to talking about institutional and systemic oppression can learn to wrestle with the reality that Jesus speaks into systems: that his turning over the tables of money changers was simply a concrete example of what he was about.

As you plan for this week, use the suggestions below to craft a service that will help to draw congregants into an Advent full of the expectation that Jesus will upend injustice, inequity, and iniquity, and likewise that Jesus will call us into this very work - in his name.

Scripture Notes

Isaiah 40:1-11

- Comfort
 - This passage holds the beautiful and powerful promise: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God!
 - The remembrance that God speaks comfort, born out of mercy and justice, into our brokenness, is life-giving.
 - Indeed, connecting the last verse of the passage, which describes Jesus as a good shepherd, to the promise of God's comfort provides an important opportunity to work with the theme of peace. The Lord, described as having a "strong arm," is also described as carrying the lambs in his arms.
 - God's comfort, manifest with strength, is used to gather and carry those who are vulnerable.
- Make a straight path
 - This passage also holds the poignant image: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
 - A particular demographic in our congregations cannot hear this without also hearing this portion of Handel's Messiah. The kingdom and revolutionary focus of Handel's Messiah provides an interesting hook for distinguishing making straight the path for political leaders and making straight the path for Jesus.
 - This line of teaching provides the opportunity to name the work we must do as follower's of Jesus if we make straight a path for his work in this world.
 - Modifying the idea of making a straight path for Jesus with what follows – that uneven ground be made level and rough places made smooth – provides important opportunities to further describe the work we must do. Name the inequity in your own community:

read the headlines in your local paper, or listen to the voices of your local teachers, of pastors serving impoverished congregations, of immigration attorneys or of community advocates, and clearly narrate to your congregation the story of the uneven ground that surrounds them.

- Connections to tax reform will name gathering and carrying those who are vulnerable, acts which have already been described as peaceful, as being a morally required social responsibility. The peace is thwarted when the poor are taxed and left in the wilderness. Furthermore, connections to tax reform will name the responsibility of followers of Jesus to participate in making straight the highway through the wilderness by being about those things that are aligned with Jesus' teaching on possessions and care for the impoverished. We make straight the path by challenging injustice and inequity.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

- **The quality of being morally right**
 - This passage uses the term "righteousness," which is, perhaps, a big, over-used, and under-analyzed word. But it means being right; being morally right. The use of this simple restatement has powerful implications.
 - First, "righteousness" is described as "kissing peace." Salvation, the coming of the kingdom of God, glory dwelling in our land, are a part of this narrative where doing what is right intimately connected to peace.
 - Second, "righteousness" is, in this passage, what makes the path! The path made straight in the wilderness, the path that prepares the way of the Lord, is built with doing what is morally right.
 - Followers of Jesus, then, who are called to make straight a path in the wilderness for the work of Jesus in this world, must do so with righteousness.
- **Salvation**
 - This passage uses the word "salvation" to describe something earthly, something in this life. This matters because so many Christians fall into the trap of thinking about salvation only in terms of what comes after this life.
 - Salvation is tied to this description: steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Followers of Jesus who take seriously the idea that we participate in our salvation will be prompted to choose love that is steadfast, lives that are faithful, and actions that are morally right.
 - Faithfulness is described as coming up from the ground which evokes, among other things, the creation of Adam from the dirt. Righteousness is described as looking down from the sky, somehow tied in the mind of this writer, to God in heaven. This coming together of heaven and earth to make straight the path is a powerful idea.
 - Also, this line about looking down from the sky is echoed in "Away in the Manger."
- Connections to tax reform will highlight what it means to be righteous in policy making and the provision of social welfare. Likewise, connections to tax reform will consider what it means to participate in salvation if salvation is a coming together of the faithfulness of those made from the dirt (us) and the righteousness of heaven. How does this relate to public policy?

2 Peter 3:8-15a

- The Day of the Lord
 - This passage gives attention to an apocalyptic vision of the end of this era, with heavens exploding, and fire consuming the elements, and all that has happened on earth being disclosed. But even this passage which talks about what comes next, rather than the Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, it instructs followers of Jesus on how to live now.
 - Followers of Jesus are instructed to live “at peace, without spot or blemish.” The bringing together of peace and of being pure provides another important way to talk about peace. Individual and corporate choices that impact the ability of each to “be at peace” inevitably impact the peace of the community.
 - This passage seems to make a startling claim: that because Jesus does not want any to perish, he is patient in waiting to accomplish the Day of the Lord. This patience of the Lord is said to be salvation, itself.
 - The Day of the Lord will bring a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness, the same concept found in Psalm 85, is at home. Being morally right is the focus! This claim challenges the idea that salvation is something tied merely to faith and not to moral requirements.
- Connections to tax reform will ask whether followers of Jesus can be found to be at peace, without spot or blemish, if we are failing to provide available food, shelter, medical care, public education, and financial support to the most fragile in our communities.

Mark 1:1-8

- Prepare the Way!
 - This passage from Mark places the language from Isaiah 40 on the lips of John the Baptist.
 - Here, it is John who prepares the way, and he does it by proclaiming a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.
 - Therefore, this idea of choosing what is morally right, of being without spot or blemish, are again connected to preparing for the work of Jesus on the earth.
- Connections to tax reform will connect repentance and forgiveness with making peace in the wilderness by naming greed, gluttony, and inattention to the needs of others for what they are: sin - the sin that so easily ensnares us; the sin that so powerfully negates our attempts to make straight the path of Jesus.

Suggested Sermon/Service Themes

Comfortable?

- This theme draws on Isaiah’s promise that God speaks comfort to God’s people.
 - In the King James Version of the Bible, which is quoted in Handle’s Messiah, Isaiah 40:2 reads “speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem.” This is a striking formulation because the way in which it uses “comfortably” does not align with the way “comfortable” is often used to describe clothing, or shoes, or the state of having enough.

- A service that engages God’s promise of comfort by examining some of the ways that the word “comfortable” is commonly used will also challenge those gathered to consider what God’s promise of comfort really means, and what it really requires.
- As noted above, connecting Isaiah 40:11, which describes Jesus as a good shepherd, to the promise of God’s comfort found in Isaiah 40:1 provides an important opportunity to work with the theme of peace. The Lord, described as having a “strong arm,” is also described as carrying the lambs in his arms. God’s comfort, manifest with strength, is used to gather and carry those who are vulnerable.

Roadwork: Preparing the Way of the Lord

- This theme draws on the instruction found in Isaiah and Mark to prepare the way of the Lord, and anticipates the labor required to make these preparations. The idea of “roadwork” will invoke remembrances of waiting, delays, and detours. Reference to these will draw attention to the effort and commitment required to accomplish making a straight path.
- Worshippers will have the opportunity to claim God’s peace as a guiding principal in preparing the way, in making the path straight. They will be able to sing of God’s peace, grasp the image of peace and righteousness kissing, and respond to the invitation to live as followers of Jesus who are preparing the way of the Lord in so many wildernesses.
- Worshippers will have the opportunity to commit to living peacefully and peaceably, and to righting those spots where the ground is uneven – where injustice yet prevails.

Worship Resources

Responsive Reading 1 (using We Call Ourselves Disciples)

One: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Many: We join with all disciples to live the Word in deed,

One: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Many: To share the cup of water and bread with all in need;

One: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Many: To work till god’s compassion and righteousness prevail,

One: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Many: till all this planet’s people know justice without fail.

All: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Responsive Reading 2 (using Rise Up O Saints of God)

One: Rise up, O saints of God! The kingdom tarries long,

Many: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for God.

One: Bring in the day of righteousness and end the night of wrong.

Many: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low;

One: Lift high the cross of Christ; tread where Christ's feet have trod;

Many: The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

One: Come sisters, brothers in the faith, rise up, O Saints of God.

All: Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

Confession 1

God we yearn for comfort, but too often seek it in corners that are too dark, stages that are too bright, jobs that are too consuming, and habits that are too dangerous. Forgive us. God we yearn for comfort but we too often settle for cheap substitutes. Forgive us. God we yearn for comfort but we too often live lives that perpetuate injustice and brokenness. Forgive us. Teach us, God, to rest in your comfort, and to struggle so that others may be comforted. We pray in the name of Jesus.

Confession 2

God in whom we live and move and have our very being, when we pray for your Kingdom to come and then fail to make it so, forgive us. When we seek your voice in the wilderness, but then fail to make the path straight, forgive us. When we pave our roads with good intentions but do not level the ground against injustice and inequity, forgive us. Teach us steadfast love and faithfulness. We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Suggested Hymns and Worship Songs:

Blessed Be the God of Israel

Build Your Kingdom Here (Rend Collective)

Called As Partners in Christ's Service

Christians All, Your Lord is Coming

Come, O Long-expected Jesus

For Everyone Born

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

One Candle Is Lit

People, Look East

Prepare the Way of the Lord (Taize)

Rise Up, O Saints of God!

Turning Over Tables (The Brilliance)

We Call Ourselves Disciples