

Pathways to Peace

December 9, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 and Matthew 3:1-12

Some of our information was accurate. Some was not. In preparing to plant fifty "50" signs in the Schramel's front yard in celebration for John's "big" birthday, the team of "do-gooders" did two things. First, we found out when John would be away from the house and then we went to local(dot)live, one of the many web sites where one can zoom in and see a close-up colorful image of a specific location. Images like those on google earth and local(dot)live are not real-time, government eye in the sky photography, but in this case, Lynn confirmed that the van in the driveway shown in the clear aerial photo was hers. We had that part of our escapade correct. We knew which yard to litter. We could see how we could put signs on both sides of their driveway and how the front yard had plenty of room for our artwork.

Unfortunately, on that particular day, John was not taking care of his ailing mother at the usual time and was instead, at home. The good news is that he greeted the villains with a big smile and a thank you for remembering his birthday. Lynn had baked cookies for us. We felt so welcome!

I have always enjoyed geography and maps. Today, with the aid of the internet, that love is fed all the more. Web sites allow one to zoom in on local street maps, photographic "maps" that show places in living color and "hybrid" maps that superimpose street and location names onto the colorful images. Not surprisingly, the more populated an area is, the better the clarity of the views. One can not, for example, zoom in for a close look at the peaks of the Adirondacks.

As with most sites, one can turn the perspective from east to south to west to north. In one such program, a close-up of the neighborhood where Sally and I live shows, in the north and south views, our home with my daughter's car in the driveway and the lot next door to us empty and in the east and west views, Sally's Subaru is in the driveway and our neighbor Frank's house has been constructed. As in the case of the Schramel search, these are not real time photos. I can't zoom in on the neighborhood to see where my cat has wandered - and believe me, I have checked into what it would cost to put a GPS collar on him so that I could do *exactly* that! The technology exists, but the monthly fees are expensive and the collars require an animal to be at about twice the size of Hobbes.

A primary advantage of web sites like these is that one can map a trip from point A to point B and take a good look at the topography and layout of ones route, even making mental images of particular landmarks to assist one in ones travels. There is also a disadvantage to the internet mapping system that I experience all too often. At least one third of the cell phone calls from my daughter, Melissa, go like this: "Hi Dad. Are you near a computer? I am driving to and need to know where to turn next. I am at and am headed and am not sure where to go." This, despite Sally putting Melissa on her AAA program so that Melissa can get paper maps of any place she wants and the fact that this Air Force Intelligence Officer is smart enough to know how to read a map. The point, of course, is that calling Dad is easier than getting a map from an AAA source, looking at it before one sets out on a trip or while one is driving.

In this Advent season, we set out to travel with hope and with all of the other gifts and motifs of our God. As we witness how each week we add a word to stars depicted on our worship bulletins each week, we realize that they "build on" each other. Last Sunday's message about hope was the best place to start – for hope is what we are about in our journey and hope is what invites us to take a pathway that leads to the ways of peace, joy and love. Like an internet map that allows us to see the "layout of our route," hope, peace, joy and love are landmarks on our pathway through Advent.

Cheryl and Bruce Taylor's use of a map of Guatemala to speak about our church's mission trip to Guatemala was suggestive, for do we not need a map, a set of directions, to know how to be a people of hope – and a people of peace. More to the point, how do we, in a world that knows so little peace, find, discover, much less walk in the pathways of, for and to peace? What will we use as our map? What will guide us in God's ways? What landmarks will help us in our Advent journey towards the grace and glory of Christmas? To which and whose directions will we hearken?

As ever, we have choices. Will we take a path that leads takes us down a road of fear or a pathway that encourages us in the ways of hope? Will we map out a way that engenders more despair or joy? Will we find a road that teaches that the world's resources are scarce and need to be hoarded or that they really are abundant and need to be shared? Will we choose pathways to peace or continue to think the only alternative is conflict, strife, power grabs, self-serving agenda, or a narrow nationalism that is nothing short of jingoism if not chauvinism?

When it comes to the choices between fear and hope, strife and peace, despair and joy, hatred and love, there is much that fuels the first words in those pairs (fear, strife, despair and hatred) and undercuts the second words (hope, peace, joy and love). For the last decade, it has been the fear of, strife engendered by, despair

found in and the hatred fed by the work of terrorists that has fueled the growing suspicion that our world is a very unsafe place. This last week, it was the events of a senseless and bewildering murder-suicide in a mall in Omaha, Nebraska that rattled us and gave birth to yet more fear. That the troubled young man who killed eight others before shooting himself had absolutely no connection to those he randomly shot makes the horror all the more haunting. Most victims know their tormentor. As terrifying as *that* is, to wonder if shots will be fired in what is considered a place of security, far from the zones of horror on the streets of Baghdad, Iraq and Kabul, Afghanistan, in middle America - how can that do anything but invoke, provoke and stoke the ways of fear, strife, despair if not more hatred?

To use internet map searches as a metaphor, what kind of image, hybrid or otherwise, would be found were we to zoom in on our lives and the lives of so many peoples of the world? Do we not suspect that we would find people who are ill at ease, un-eased (dis-eased?) in body, mind, and soul? Would we not, in this Advent Season discover that instead of joy there is sadness, a sense of loss? If people are devoid of hope, devoid of peace, joy and love, will we not discover that people are *so* anxious to find something, *anything* to fill the empty places and voids of their lives that they will do anything, even the wrong things to fill the empty places in their lives? Ultimately, the question is whether we of the church will rise up and embrace the God-given mandate, the commissioning, to offer an alternative, to speak of how the words of Isaiah 11 were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and that the promises in that chapter and the words in Solomon's Psalm are not pipe dreams, are far more than words – they are visions for God's people.

John Lennon's quote on the first page of our worship bulletin ["If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there'd be peace."], underscoring how people put energy and hopes in *things* instead of heart-felt efforts to change the status quo, is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Are Mr. Lennon's words not suggestive that placing the material needs of the self above the pressing needs of the world is unfaithful to the pathways, the map, that God sets before us – the path that can lead to hope, joy, love – and give us the means to find pathways to peace – peace of soul, peace of mind, peace within families, communities and yes, across this globe?

So, where do we find these pathways to hope, peace, joy, love and all that is good? Are there not timeless battles between despair and hope, strife and peace, despair and joy, hate and love, evil and good? There is an abundance of *secular* expressions of the struggle between good and evil – from the new release of the movie "The Golden Compass" to the analogies found in "Stars Wars," the "Harry Potter" tales and the Tolkien trilogy about Hobbits and Middle Earth. It is no

surprise that we of the church suggest that the best place for people to start is with Scripture and with the journeys of faith that the church has embraced for centuries.

The promises of God as found in Isaiah's words and in a Psalm of King Solomon written in the tradition of Solomon's father, David - these words are replete with markers, landmarks, if you will, for a map of life, a map of faith - that point to the promises of God, built on a foundation of hope and that point to the ways of peace. Solomon lived nearly a thousand years before the birth of Christ. Isaiah lived more than seven hundred years before the blessed events of what we call Christmas - but both lived in the hope that the world would one day welcome the Prince of Peace. They knew the "chosen" people were on a journey and both of those men knew that part of their God-given task was to point their people in the right direction, to give them a "map" that showed the pathways to a peace of God that passes all understanding, all human knowledge, a pathway to peace that precluded foreign alliances, a dependence of military and even economic might and instead embraced ways of grace, goodness, reconciliation, hope, joy and love - all pointers, markers, pathways to that gift we call peace - peace in the inner reaches of each human soul that then moves people to *want* peace to be a part of everyone's lives.

Then we have the ministry of John the Baptist. John, Jesus' cousin, is often called the last Old Testament prophet. His ministry is recorded in the *New Testament*, but John's prophecy, like those who went before him, are about a coming Messiah. Even his attire and choice of foods are in keeping with that of prophets who lived hundreds of years before him. Today we affirm how words of the Old Testament and John the Baptist's ministry are like important points on a map that ultimately point to Christmas, to the birth of Jesus. In one sense, a long journey of faith was complete in the birth of Jesus and yet, here we are, once again on the journey, preparing again for the culmination of Advent, for the end of a travel done in hope, on behalf of peace and in the pursuit of joy and love. John the Baptist completes the journey from prophecy to fulfillment, from what was promised of the ages to that which was complete in the gift of an Only Begotten One of God. As we heard words from the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we heard how the people of Jerusalem and Judea flocked to him. Yes, there were Pharisees and Sadducees in the crowd, persons John the Baptist thought to be hypocrites, but today we emphasize how the people of the land walked great distances to be out along the Jordan River. It is the intentionality of their journey, the purposefulness with which they walked that we want to celebrate this morning as we find ways and pathways to peace in all of its manifestations.

John's message was about reconciliation, repentance and baptism for the remission of sins. But think of the journey these people took – a journey of hope that would lead to peace in their lives – and the message for us today is that we, like them, would be intentional about taking a journey of faith that leads to reconciliation with God, repentance for our sins, grace that renews true fellowship one with another and takes us on a pathway to peace – the peace of God.

For this past Friday evening's Advent Festival, Carol Anne led the children through a darkened church stopping at three different doors behind which "innkeepers" claimed there was no room to be had for Mary and Joseph. The Rev. Strawbridge took all of us on a short but meandering journey around the church building that ultimately led to this sanctuary and the first lighting of the garlands and tree. As the children and adults moved from darkness to light, from rejection to welcome, from the promise of a birth to the threshold of its occurrence, it was as though we were following a map, not only walking from Nazareth to Bethlehem as did Mary and Joseph, along some of the same paths the people of Jerusalem and Judea took to get to the Jordan River thirty years later, ... for we were in our journey through this building, walking away from darkness to light, from rejection at the doorways of inns to the acceptance of a humble manger amongst the cows, from fear towards hope, from despair to joy, towards all that is loving and good and away from what embraces strife to a pathway of peace.

As we journeyed through this building this past Friday, the older children and the adults carried votive candles – small lights that would help lead the way. Like those candles, like the little lights that grace our tree and garland, like the candles on our communion table and around the advent wreath, we are to be beacons of light for each other and the peoples of the world – that all might be led through this Advent Season to the glories of Christmas and the pathways to peace.

Amen.