

Peace: Turning Absence Into Presence

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When I was about three years old, Mom would let my little sister and me go outside and play in our backyard. Just beyond the yard was a large stand of trees that we called “the woods,” a dark, mysterious, scary place. The tall pine trees grew dense, carpeting the red dirt underneath with their needles, and very little sunlight made its way into the woods. Beth and I were curious about the woods, but we never took more than two or three steps past the first trees.

One late afternoon, we were playing outside with our Raggedy Ann dolls, which we called our babies. We would put them in a little red wagon and pull them around the yard, talking to them the whole time, imitating the way we heard real mothers talking to their little children. When Mom called us in for supper, I left my doll in the yard, thinking that I would go back and get her later. Mom lifted little Beth into her high chair, and I clambered up into my chair and on top of the eight-inch-thick dictionary that I sat on so that I could reach my plate. No booster seats in those days.

About halfway through supper, I glanced out the kitchen window and suddenly realized that it was getting dark outside. I thought, *Oh no, my baby’s out there all alone in the dark! What if she’s scared, or hungry, or cold? What if she’s wandered off into the woods looking for me?* The longer I sat there on my dictionary, watching it get darker outside, the more upset I became. Finally I burst into tears. I knew that I had to go outside and rescue my baby, but that probably meant going into the dark, scary woods.

Slowly I climbed down from my dictionary, reluctantly marched my little three-year-old self to the back door, pulled it open, and stood there staring into the pitch black backyard for a moment or two. According to family legend, I then let out a huge sigh of relief, turned back to my mother, and said, “Look, Mommy, here comes my sister-in-law now, out of the woods with my baby.”

In making up a story about the miraculous rescue of my doll, I found peace. My baby was safe, I didn’t have to go into the woods looking for her, and as a bonus, I had apparently acquired a sister-in-law. My mother—God rest her soul—was wise enough to share my joy that my sister-in-law had showed up to rescue my baby and save the day. She neither fussed at me for leaving my doll outside nor corrected my story about having a sister-in-law.

We all tell stories, whether we're three or ninety-three. It's part of what makes us human. In telling stories, our imaginations open up room inside us for the possibility of peace. As Pádraig Ó Tuama, the Irish poet and theologian, says, "Stories are bigger than us, and if we can tell them well, we might just find ourselves being saved into something that doesn't yet exist, but can be imagined right now."

In the Old Testament passage that Laurel read for us earlier, the prophet Isaiah wants the Hebrew people to imagine a world in which the "life-giving Spirit of God" will bring wisdom and understanding, give direction, build strength, and instill knowledge. In that world, as Isaiah tells the story, "the wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. Calf and lion will eat from the same trough, and a little child will tend them."

In the passage from the third chapter of Matthew that I just read to you, we have a story inside a story. The inner story, told by John the Baptist, imagines a time when Jesus "will ignite . . . the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house . . . [and] everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned." The outer story—the frame, if you will—is about John the Baptist's fury that the Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up to be baptized simply because it was the popular thing to do. John calls them a "brood of snakes" who have "slithered down to the river"—such a vivid image. In the outer story, John himself becomes the story, being told by the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

As an English professor, I used to occasionally teach a course on life writing, in which students would write brief memoirs—autobiographical essays—about themselves. We would talk about the difference between a fact, which is objectively verifiable, and a truth, which often is not. Facts are like the bones of our bodies—tangible, hard, with little flexibility. Truths, in contrast, are like the ligaments that hold our bones together—stretchy and harder to grab hold of, not as likely to snap under pressure. My students would often struggle to resolve the conflict between the facts of their lives and the truth of their experiences. In my story about my baby, the woods, and my make-believe sister-in-law, the facts would argue that I made the whole thing up. But the truth is that my mother allowed me the space to imagine a peaceful resolution to my dilemma. Our stories allow our imagination to make meaning of our lives—and that meaning is what creates the space for peace.

In the Gospels, when Jesus is asked a question, he rarely give a direct answer—only three times, in fact. More often, he replies with another question, obviously trying to get the person to see the truth for themselves. Jesus also used a lot of parables—basically little short stories—in teaching; in fact, we have at least thirty of Jesus's parables recorded in the Gospels. The Bible Project tells us that "Jesus didn't tell parables to make everything clear. Rather, he wanted to provoke the imagination and invite people to see what God is doing in the world from a new perspective." In fact, you could say that Jesus turned the exclamation mark of the Old Testament, with all of its

laws, pronouncements, and prophecies, into the question mark of the New Testament.

So why is all this stuff about stories and truths important? Because they're the tools that peace uses to open our imagination and help us envision something better—a better world, better lives, better relationships. There's an old Irish saying that goes something like this: "It is in the shelter of each other and our stories that the people live." When I first read this quotation, I was reminded of the "Life Story Potlucks" that we used to have on Sunday evenings downstairs in the vestry. We would share supper and then one of us would regale the others with the "story of our life," and I loved those evenings. We need stories to help us imagine peace, because it's peace that creates the space in which we can truly love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus came to earth as a little baby boy to show us how to find that same peace.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines *peace* as "a condition marked by freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions." We often use the word *peace* to refer to the *absence* of something—the absence of hostility or aggression, for example. But when a war between two countries ends, what happens? The end of aggression doesn't mean that things are immediately wonderful again. Instead, the absence of war means that the people have the opportunity to imagine a better world. In other words, peace represents both the end of the war (an absence) and the better world that is to follow (a presence).

In the church newsletter that you got this week, I included a link to the Bible Project's video about peace in the Bible. If you watched that video, you learned that in the Old Testament, the word for peace is *shalom*, and that *shalom* refers not simply to the absence of war, but instead to something that is complete, restored to wholeness. Think of peace—*shalom*—as two sides of a coin. Peace turns absence into presence by opening space for us to imagine love, compassion, and empathy.

According to Irish theologian Peter Rollins, there are four basic ways that people tend to cope with their differences.

- (1) Forced conformity: "I'm right, and you're wrong. Stop being different, and start being like me."
- (2) Rejection: "I'm right and you're wrong, so you don't belong here."
- (3) Avoidance: "I'm right and you're wrong, so let's don't talk about it." Churches have a bad tendency to use avoidance to cope with their differences.
- (4) Acceptance: Acknowledging that beneath our differences, we're all the same. Right and wrong become irrelevant.

Each of us experiences the world differently, and that difference emerges in the stories that we tell ourselves and each other. In order to find peace, we need stories that move us toward each other, not away from each other. Jesus came to earth to show us how to find God's peace, and

that work continues through the Holy Spirit that lives and acts in us and through us. He restored to wholeness the broken relationships between us and our Creator. Jesus was whole and complete, the perfect balance of absence and presence. During this Advent season, he invites us to follow him, learn from him, and find that peace for ourselves.