

“Leveling Life, Welcoming Christ”  
Isaiah 26:1-13; Romans 15:1-13; Matthew 3:1-12

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Any of you here last week know that I was out in the woods not too long ago. One thing about being out in the woods in Idaho is that it's a lot different than the woods in Colorado where I used to spend a lot of time. In Colorado there was always some landmark that I could see. Going out in the woods in this part of Idaho is somewhat different. You cross one little drainage and another and the land begins to twist a round a little bit, and pretty soon if you don't have an excellent sense of direction, you can begin to wonder where the car was that you left at the beginning of your wandering. I was doing that once and realized that I was to the point where I needed to get back to the car. So I started to hike and I thought "I'm not absolutely sure I'm going in the right direction." Luckily I'd bought a little GPS unit recently, and indeed, I was NOT going in the right direction. I had to repent of the route I had taken, turn around and go.

Often times in life we are somewhat like a walk in the woods. We're out in the world and it seems like wilderness all around us. Today we have a voice crying out - that GPS crying out from the Bible, offering us direction, encouraging us to change where we're going, to notice that God calls out to us, that there is a beacon if we turn around and see it, that God is there. We're invited to turn and go toward God. As we think about that "turning around", it's not a turning around from just anything. You notice how John is inviting the people to confess their sins and to turn around. Sin - one way of defining that is to "go down the wrong path"; "to miss the mark", to go down the wrong route. It's a simple turning around, to come into God's way, to see that God is leading us if we turn around and come to him.

But the question remains. What do we see when we turn around? In this season we get to talk a little bit about that. We talked a little bit about that last week, about what we see. We see a God of Hope, one that is bringing justice to victory. This week we have another word. That last line that I read you out of Romans where it talks about the God of hope - *May the God of hope fill you with peace*. So one of the things God can do, one of the things that as we turn around and go towards God that we can find, is that we'll be filled with peace. What does that mean? To be filled with peace or to have peace fulfilled in our lives is another way of translating that. What is peace?

Often times I think of peace and I have this image of rocking on a front porch swing. Having the absence of conflict and struggle, getting away from the stress. And yet as I think about what peace is, there's that element of it that brings that tranquility and calm, but I recognize that God's peace is not just a moment where there is nothing else. What happens when you have nothing else? What happens when you have a vacuum? It gets filled up. I can't swing on a front porch swing forever. I'd get pretty bored. No, God's peace is more than the absence of conflict. It actually invites us in. It's active. One way I know that is that the word in Hebrew we translate as peace is a word that is much broader and fuller. It has that sense of well-being and harmony. And so we hear Paul describing peace as being able to sing a stunning anthem to God. If you sing in a choir, one of the fun things about singing is being able to get those harmonies right, get the timing down, get it all working. And when it comes out all together and it's heard and it's wonderful, it's fun, isn't there a feeling of peace? When it works? When it fits?

As we begin to look where God leads us, it's an active part of our lives. So John talks about preparing the way. We turn and we move things aside. We begin to take a look at our lives. We ask whether we are in harmony. Do we fit?

Have you ever been in a house where the floors are really crooked? Ever felt like it would be really strange to live in a house where you were always feeling like you were going uphill or downhill? That idea of level. When we build something we have a level that we use and we level out the things we are building. We like to have our lives level in that way with the force of gravity. Well, what's the force of gravity in our lives? Not just the attraction with our body and that great big body beneath us, but that great big wonderful One who surrounds it all, who created it all. Isn't God the real force of gravity in our lives that we need to level our lives against? As we begin to look and see if our lives are level, it's a way of looking and seeing, am I going in the right direction? God changes us as we open up and as we work on making the way clearer for God. Even after we turn around sometimes it's easy to say "Well, I've got this thing right here and that will protect me from actually having to see that beacon out there that might change me, that might move in a new direction." But it's that movement that really is the peace that God is offering us. When we come together and work together I remember that God calls us into community and I notice that in community we begin to feel that peace. It reminds of two people who can really dance because you see it work. And when you see it work there is a sense of peace. That's the way God calls us to live our lives together, like we're in that dance together and as it begins to work we get to experience that peace. The dance begins, I believe, with God and the way God enters in with us, takes us as His partner in a way and we begin to dance and begin to know the wonder of peace.

I could keep going for a long time on all the different ways we can think about peace and how working together interpersonally within communities, within our world, all the different ways that peace works out. The fact is, as I began to work on this sermon this week I wondered how in the world do I try to encompass even most of what peace is about? And luckily there was a verse that helped me out a little bit. God's peace is beyond all understanding. So I only give a taste. I only give a particular vision and yet it is as we follow and we as know God in our lives we begin to understand what that peace is all about. There's a second thing that struck me this week about the word peace, particularly, that is the Hebrew word behind peace, *shalom*. It is said that *shalom* can be used as all four parts of speech. Well, I can do that pretty well as a noun or as an adjective or an adverb. I was having a little more trouble with peace as a verb. But perhaps it points us to who God is and what really God is all about and that peace is more than just something we experience but it's something we do. As we live in relationship with God and we live in relationship with each other, and as we live as part of this world God has created, God's peace as we turn around - perhaps it's appropriate that we use that really active understanding of John's preaching as we turn around and change our lives, because God's peace is active and moving and part of becoming members of God's dance, doing God's work. We find in the process, the peace that passes all understanding. So may the God of hope fill you with joy and peace, so that hope may abound by the work of the Holy Spirit. Amen.