

Restore Us, O God: Peace *Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13* | 12/4/2011

After a very long and boring sermon, the parishioners filed out of the church saying nothing to the preacher. Toward the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons. "Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!" The pastor was thrilled. "No one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why." "Well," said the parishioner, "it reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!" Hopefully, I can do better than that today.

A Hollywood studio lamp, straight out of the 1940s. An aviator-wing desk, inspired by a World War II fighter plane. An 8-foot-tall architectural model of the Eiffel Tower. A space pen that works upside down and underwater. Are any of these items on your Christmas list? If so, Santa is going to have to visit Restoration Hardware. This high-end store is where people go when they want to step back in time and buy an item that reminds them of some golden age from the past. Paris in the 1880s. Hollywood in the 1940s. The space race of the 1960s.

People often look back with longing, feeling that something precious has been lost. They want *a missing treasure to be restored*. And so do we. Now maybe we don't feel the kind of void that can be filled by a Hollywood floor lamp, crafted of solid cast aluminum and steel, retailing for \$1,995. One lamp, \$2,000. Must be a good one, but does it give us the light we need?

Our spiritual and emotional darkness is not going to be eliminated by a Hollywood lamp. Wandering through the darkness of daily life, we often stumble and fall, hurt ourselves and others, crash into obstacles and leave a trail of debris behind us. We long for a lantern that will light our path, a beacon to guide us and lead us home. And so we light a candle -- an Advent candle. Each Sunday we light another candle and say, "Restore us, O God." Restore our hope. Restore our peace. Restore our joy. Restore your love. We know we need restoration. Not Restoration Hardware, as great a store as it is.

Last week we focused on the restoration of hope; today's topic is the restoration of peace. Psalm 85 begins with a line that was spoken by the people of Israel, back in their homeland after a time of exile in Babylon: "Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob" (v. 1). The people are thankful that their long captivity is over, and that God has "pardoned all their sin" (v. 2). But still, something is missing.

The emptiness they feel is very similar to the void that may remain deep within us after we earn a degree, start a better job, move into a bigger house, or drive a new car off the lot. We may know how fortunate we are. We may appreciate God's favor toward us. But we sometimes wonder why everything we thought we wanted still isn't enough. We wonder why good fortune in this life doesn't give us a sense of peace.

True peace will escape us until our restless hearts begin to rest in God. Serenity cannot be granted by a diploma, a promotion, a McMansion or a luxury sedan. It comes to us as a gift from God, and it includes forgiveness of sin and the restoration of our relationship with the Lord.

According to *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 8, 2011), an artist named Franck de Las Mercedes is taking the idea of peace packages literally. He mails small boxes with abstract designs on the outside to anyone, anywhere in the world -- for free. Pasted under the address is a label that reads: Fragile. Handle with Care. Contains Peace.

Franck says that we expect something of value to come in a box, like a shirt or a book -- especially at Christmas! But his boxes are empty of everything except a message that has no price, such as "Peace," "Love" or "Hope." Since 2006, the artist and his wife have mailed more than 9,000 boxes to people around the world, and all he asks is that recipients send him e-mails with photos of themselves and the boxes. Franck's hope is that people who receive his boxes will devote some thought and conversation to intangibles such as peace, love and hope. The idea has now spread to schools and churches that are making their own boxes.

When God sends a peace package, the box is never empty. Psalm 85 tells us that God the Lord will "speak peace to his people," and will call for them to respond by turning to him "in their hearts" (v. 8). God's salvation is sent out into the land, and is received by "those who fear him" (v. 9).

God is generous with peace and salvation, but God requires a response. The only way we will benefit from this gift is to receive it by turning to God in our hearts and offering the respect that God deserves. Each of us must accept this package, instead of choosing to "return to sender," unopened. When we open it, a precious collection of treasures spills out. Steadfast love from good flows down to meet our response of faithfulness. The righteousness of God evokes in us a sense of peace, of shalom in the deepest and truest sense – not just an absence of conflict, but complete fullness of life. Peace that includes hope and joy and love.

God's peace package contains more than meets the eye. *Packed into this box is the entire character of God:* Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace and goodness. All of these qualities are intertwined and mutually supportive, since love is connected closely to faithfulness, and true peace is always dependent on the presence of justice and righteousness. It is impossible for peace to exist in a community that is marked by injustice and unrighteousness.

As one American leader said in the mid-20th century, "Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin." The speaker was not a peace activist or antiestablishment radical. He was Dwight David Eisenhower, five-star general in the U.S. Army and 34th president of the United States. Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin, in the world as we know it and in the peace package that comes to us from God.

When we tear open this package, we find the gift of God's own self. Through an act of divine self-giving, God enters more deeply into our lives, so that our hearts will no longer be restless, but instead will rest in God. A priceless treasure is placed before us, one that makes it possible for God's glory to dwell in our land (v. 9).

We need this gift now more than ever because we are not going to find peace by shopping at Restoration Hardware -- even if we could afford it. The economic recovery is moving slowly, and our material fortunes have not yet been restored. Advanced degrees, well-paying jobs, bigger houses, and fancy cars remain out of reach for many Americans. But even in tough economic times, God gives us the gift of non-material wealth: Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, and goodness.

Nonmaterial wealth. There's a mind-bender! Not the kind of riches we normally pursue. Such treasures are always available, however, especially to those who turn to God in their hearts. The gifts of the Lord continue to come into the middle of human life, most clearly through the birth of Jesus.

We don't really need Hollywood lamps or space pens, aviator-wing desks or models of the Eiffel Tower. The treasure that needs restoration today is the gift of Christ at Christmas -- a gift we can receive with gratitude and delight. It is through the birth of Jesus that God speaks "peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts." And then, in the life and ministry of Christ, the qualities of steadfast love and faithfulness meet, while righteousness and peace come together and "kiss each other" (vv. 8, 10). In this season of Advent, why not respond to this gift by sending out some peace packages of your own? At a time when Christmas packages are filled with everything *but* peace, we could reclaim some of the missing treasures of this season.

So what could it mean to send a peace package? Extend steadfast love to a teenager who is rebelling with every ounce of his energy. Practice faithfulness in your marriage, and make an effort to express appreciation to your spouse. Show righteousness in your school or workplace, by being honest and fair in all of your activities. Work for peace in your relationships, looking for ways to reduce tensions and increase harmony, instead of picking fights and spreading gossip. If you invest as much in these packages as in your holiday gifts, this may turn out to be your best Christmas ever.

Restore us, O God. Give us the gift of your peace, so that we can share it with others.

Pastor Keith

Children's Sermon

Hold up two magnets in such a way that they repel each other. Describe them as fighting each other and refusing to be at peace, and ask the children if they ever feel this way in their own lives. Turn one of the magnets around, and demonstrate how it is at peace with the other magnet once it is turned around. Say that something similar happens to us when we turn ourselves toward God -- Psalm 85 says that the Lord "will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts" (v. 8). Ask the children to name some of the things that they can do to turn themselves to God, and suggest that prayer, worship and Bible study are all good ways to turn themselves in the right way. Assure them that God wants to be at peace with them, and he promises to forgive them and pardon "all their sin" (v. 2). Explain that we sometimes feel upset when we are doing things that are wrong, struggling like a backwards magnet, but when we change our behavior and turn toward God, then God forgives us completely. Show how the magnets attract each other when they are lined up in the right way, and say that this is an illustration of how "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" when we are living in the way that God desires (v. 10).