

Today, I will explore the theme of “A Song of Peace” based on Psalm 85. Some Bible scholars place the writing of this Psalm in the context of war and the conquest of God’s people. The Babylonians had destroyed the sacred city of Jerusalem and exiled some Jews to Babylon. This psalm was written in the context of the Jews returning to their homeland and finding Jerusalem desolate and destroyed. The long-awaited homecoming after fifty years of exile was bittersweet, and those conflicting feelings are reflected in the first seven verses of this Psalm.

In the course of seven short verses, this Psalm writer expresses seemingly incompatible, conflicting ideas about God’s past forgiveness, present anger, and possible future salvation.

In verses eight to thirteen, God stands up and is revealed to the Psalmist, who says: “Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak *peace* to his people.”

Peace. Speak peace to God’s people. The word “peace” in the Hebrew is “shalom,” which literally means completeness and welfare. True peace, this completeness and welfare of God, is then poetically described by two evocative images in verse ten: Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

The word “love” in the Hebrew means “goodness” and “loving kindness,” and it is such a warm and fuzzy image of the grace of God. This “love” is paired with “faithfulness,” which in the Hebrew can also mean “firmness” and “truth.” It seems to me that God is prescribing “tough love”—like Dr. Phil—as the way to true peace.

Furthermore, not only will love and faithfulness meet together, but righteousness and peace will kiss each other. The word “righteousness” is the same Hebrew word for “justice.” This reminds me of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who once said that “Peace is more than simply the absence of war; it’s the presence of justice. Without justice, there can be no peace.” Righteousness or justice and peace will kiss each other because they are intimately related; you cannot have one without the other.

Similarly, in verses eight to thirteen, I imagine God as making music by **singing** a song of peace to his people. It is interesting that in the Hebrew, the verb “dabar,” which the NRSV translates in verse eight as “to speak” can also mean “to sing.” So when God speaks, God sings not just through a single voice, but polyphonically, as in a divine fugue that weaves in melodies of loving kindness and firm truth, themes of justice and wholeness, and rhythms of goodness and righteousness.

God’s song of peace challenges the world’s understanding of peace. For some, the word “peace” conjures up images of relaxing on a deserted beach sipping an umbrella drink. But God’s song of peace is not a song of escapism, but of engagement with the suffering and problems of the world.

For some, peace is everybody agreeing with their opinions and everyone doing things their way. But God’s song of peace consists of not one single voice or way; instead, it is a communal endeavor, incorporating the contrapuntal interweaving of many voices.

For some, peace is the elimination of conflict, and the avoidance of people who cause those conflicts. Indeed, some say that ironically, war is the inability to do conflict. War shows the desire of one party to annihilate the other rather than grapple with conflict and with difference.¹

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/OrthodoxHeretic/posts/667221013306589>

For some, peace is forgetting or suppressing or ignoring the pain of their past and the anxieties about their future. But God's song of peace weaves the bitter and the sweet from our past and our present, and incorporates those themes to sing a new song for our future.

Illustration of Robi Damelin and Ali Abu Awwad...

<https://onbeing.org/programs/robi-damelin-ali-abu-awwad-no-taking-sides/>

Robi Damelin is an Israeli who lost her son to a Palestinian sniper. The young man is Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian who lost his brother to an Israeli soldier. These two have every right to hate each other, but instead of clinging to traditional ideologies and turning their pain into more violence, they've decided to understand the other side — Israeli and Palestinian — by sharing their pain and their humanity. They tell of a gathering network of survivors who share their grief, their stories of loved ones, and their ideas for lasting peace. They don't want to be right; they want to be understood.²

The book *The Anatomy of Peace* argues that “The outward wars around us started because of an inward war that went unnoticed: someone started seeing others as objects, and others used that as justification for doing the same. This is the germ, and germination of war. When we carry this germ, we're just wars waiting to happen.”³ When our hearts are at war, we see others as OBJECTS: they are obstacles that stand in our way, they are beneath us, they are the “bad hombres” or the “deplorables.” We look down upon them with contempt *or* with pity. Conversely, we also see ourselves as OBJECTS... as better-than, or more deserving than others. We have a need to be seen as respectable, smart, helpful. Or else, we see ourselves as worse-than others, deficient, broken. Either way, when our heart is not at peace, we lack wholeness, completeness and welfare. When we're not at peace with ourselves, we're going to be at war with others.

When our hearts are at peace – we see others as PEOPLE: their hopes, dreams, cares, and fears are as real to us as our own. And we see ourselves as a full person: our strengths and our weaknesses, our virtues and our vices, our successes and our failures. We have no need to see ourselves as better or more deserving than others. We can also care less of what others think of us. When we are at peace with who we are...we have a better chance to be at peace with others.

How do we do that? Advent is a time to take stock of our spiritual relationship with our God. We often think God's judgment toward us is bad. But judgment can be good news. For under the light of God's judgment, our heavenly Father discloses the truth about us, but this disclosure is made *in love*. God's love sent Jesus into the world so that we can have peace, be made whole and complete. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2, Jesus himself is our peace who destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and reconciled them both to God through the cross. Might I suggest that Jesus also destroys the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility within ourselves?

During this Advent season, are there any persons in your life whom you've cut off, whom you're avoiding, whom you've written off? During this time of Advent preparation, perhaps God is calling us to reexamine these relationships and the difficult circumstances that may have broken them. Perhaps instead of pushing all this history away, God wants to help us understand it and learn from it. The short-cut way to peace might be to avoid difficult people and expunge painful memories. But God's peace is neither escapism nor amnesia. True wholeness requires a memory of the past, an engagement in the present, and the courage to face the future—one that pairs truth and love, righteousness and peace. This will look different in each person's life. During this season of Advent, let us receive and join God's song of peace that brings wholeness and completeness – in our lives and in our community – as we prepare for Christ's coming and eagerly await for God's salvation.

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/robi-damelin-ali-abu-awwad-no-taking-sides/>

³ The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*, p. 105.