

Bloomington Mennonite Church
Sermon, December 4th, 2022 – Second Sunday of Advent

Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord: Sing a Song of Peace, Sing a New World into Being

This last Sunday many of us experienced the joy of watching Theatre of the Beat's performance of *Selah's Song*. It was a wonderful evening. Here are some pictures of the event:



For those of you who were unable to make it out, *Selah's Song* is a funny, playful, and thought-provoking musical telling the story of a young girl, Selah, who loved to sing. Selah belongs to a farming family and is growing up under the shadow of war. Early on in the play, we learn that her father has recently returned from the frontlines of the war and was experiencing the difficulties that come with trying to return to a sense of "normal" life after seeing the horrors of war. But things back home were anything but normal for Selah and her father as the king was making life exceedingly difficult for a peasant family like them. The brutal king exacted greater

and greater war taxes on the population and threatened conscription or, worse, the dungeon, for those who refused or were unable to pay their taxes. Unsurprisingly, the king needed to find a way to make the war palatable to a people tired of it all, and so the king's propaganda machine got to work, literally drumming up a song to indoctrinate the population and make the law of the land (the "rules") and the war seem all too necessary to maintain the order of things.

The spirited, wise, and courageous young Selah saw through it all, however. She saw how the "rules" of the king were unfair and how the war was wreaking havoc, on her father principally, but also on her village. And so, Selah, who loved to sing, wrote a song challenging the King's song; a song that became an anthem for peace between the warring villages. Many of you might remember the chorus – this is how it went (and for those who were there, you can help me and join along): "Won't you sing, sing, sing with me won't you sing a song of peace" (X2). There were also four verses to Selah's song, and while I won't sing those for you, I do want to spend some time reflecting on the first and last verses since I think they can help us think through our scriptures for today as well as to think through what it means to prepare the way of the Lord this advent season as we anticipate the coming restoration of God in Jesus. The first verse of the song goes like this:

"Whenever I plant a seed in the ground, I wonder what its going to do. Will it find just what it needs in the soil, will it find a way to take root? Will it poke through the surface somewhere, will it push up and reach for the sky? Will it sprout, grow, and drink in the air, will it wave leaves of green way up high."

As was already mentioned, Selah is part of a farming family, so not surprisingly she sings songs derived from her embodied experience of planting seeds. But as the last verse of the song makes clear, the planting of seeds also becomes a metaphor for the life-giving potential of her song - how it is like a seed planted in the soil of the world around her, her family, and her village. Will

her song take root? Could it change the way things are in the broken world she lives in? Selah doesn't know the answers to these questions in advance. All she can do is prepare for a better future by planting the seeds she's been given and so she decides to keep on singing. Like John the Baptist, she is "a voice crying in the wilderness." Listen to Selah's resolve in the final verse of the song:

"So I guess I'll keep planting my seeds in the ground, never knowing if they will take root. And I will keep singing my songs in the air, never knowing what they will do. Cause the drumbeat of war that we hear everywhere, is a sound so afraid and alone, but there's another drummer, drumming somewhere with a rhythm that's calling us home."

Selah's song is, admittedly, a small offering to the world and she can't calculate or have total control over how far her song travels, but she can keep singing and in singing she can embody hope for a different world than the one she was living in at the time. Singing, as the last line of the last verse indicates, becomes Selah's way of tuning her life into a different rhythm than the world around her, a rhythm led not by the drumbeat of war, but by a different drummer entirely.

I couldn't help but think here of the young girl Selah as an image of God, a young girl gardening, planting seeds playfully and with the hope that something good comes of them. Given our scriptures for today, I also couldn't help but hear some resonances or harmonies here between Selah's song and Isaiah's song that we heard read earlier. Remember how Isaiah 11 started with an agricultural metaphor too? Not a seed, but a shoot coming from the stock of Jesse. Isaiah, too, sang a song of hope about new life growing in Israel in a time when war and injustice ran rampant. And wouldn't you know, just as Selah's song was a song of peace, so too is Isaiah's. After all, there are those much-loved verses, verses 6 to 9, that give us the images of the future day when peace and harmony in the world will be so widespread that the wolf will dwell with the lamb [and] the infant will play by a viper's hole. We often forget, however, that

bracketing these much-loved verses are verses describing the coming one, a King, who will make such a peace possible. Peace and harmony, for Isaiah, don't come in an instant and neither are they realized without a reckoning.

Notably, Isaiah says that the coming King will make peace possible by bringing right judgment upon the people and effecting justice in the land. Isaiah's song of peace has a bit of a sharp edge to it, in other words. This coming King isn't just about reconciling lions and lambs, rather, in contrast to the corrupt kings of his generation, this King will "render verdicts" rightly and justly and will judge those who have done wrong. Such a king was notably absent in Isaiah's time and was certainly absent in Selah's village of East Candling. While major power players in our society often like to keep up the appearance of benevolently providing peace and well-being for the people, often there is more going on than meets the eye. Notably, Isaiah speaks of the coming King as one who will look beneath the surface, who will not judge based on "what his eyes see" or his "ears hear." Rather, he will judge by the Spirit of God that has rested on him. Too often what our eyes see, and our ears hear are the standards of justice that the world takes for granted, standards and rules that too often favor the powerful and keep the lowly down. In the play, Selah struggled with these standards and rules – "them's the rules," she was told. But she could see that injustice was baked into some of the rules and so those rules couldn't always be trusted. Selah's song had its own sharp edge to it too, then, in that it made a judgment on the rules of the land that were unfair and looked and longed for a truer justice.

One of the key tensions in the play centered around a question - can a song really change things? Can a song really prepare us for and indeed even help bring about a new world? Can a song really harness the power that is necessary to effect change? Yesterday, when I was driving in the car with Micah, he asked me the question: "Dad, who do you think has the most power in

the world?” The question really struck me, because it made me think: “how do we usually think of power and how does that determine how we decide who has the most of it? When we say that a song is powerful do we mean the same thing as saying that a nation’s military is powerful?” On one level it is so easy to look at the major national power players in our world, with weapons of war that far exceed what we can even imagine, and say that clearly *they* have the most power. And, there is no question that they do have power to effect real and devastating change throughout our entire world. And yet, there are countless other instances throughout history where we see how those deemed “powerless” or small or insignificant are able to effect immense change through imaginative and creative means – change through protests; change through civil disobedience; change through simple acts of kindness; and change through, yes, even a song!

Often it is seen as naïve and irresponsible to talk about addressing the unrest and injustice of our world through a song when what is “really” needed is a show of force equal and indeed even greater than the enemy’s own show of force. And yet, Isaiah paints a picture of the great power that words can have in the form of yet another description of the coming king in verse 5:

And he shall strike the land with the rod of his mouth, with the breath from his lips put the wicked to death.”

Woah. Did that line stand out to you when it was first read? “What happened to the song of peace?” we might wonder. Robert Alter, scholar and gifted translator of the Hebrew Bible, offers a note on this jarring verse in his translation, saying this:

“The formulation [he shall strike the land with the rod of his mouth] is a pointed oxymoron: striking the land and (in the second verset) killing the wicked are violent acts, but this king will somehow realize these ends necessary to justice through speech, in keeping with the spirit of the Lord that has rested on him.”

We might rightly be repulsed by the language of striking land and killing the wicked, but Alter’s suggestion that this language becomes oxymoronic when framed as speech acts should make us

ponder a bit more just how the speech and the breath of this coming King can bring significant power that affects justice; and it should make us ponder more how our speech and our breath can effect justice in the face of unrest and violence.¹

Given our discussion of Selah's song of Peace this morning, I wonder, what if we saw Isaiah's coming King as affecting justice through a song that immobilized or even destroyed the forces of injustice and destruction? There is something powerful about speech and about song – powerful enough to bring down the powerful from their thrones, powerful enough to effect social change, and powerful enough to inspire us to change our lives to reflect the justice and peace of God. After all, as *Selah's Song* teaches us, justice is not just about good rulers replacing bad ones so that justice can be implemented by rulers while the rest of us sit idly by. Rather, justice is about the whole community living in right relationship and standing together to build a better world for everyone. Despite being backed into a corner, Selah still had a choice – she might have refused to sing her song and almost did – she almost gave into the King's propaganda. She might have decided that the world as it was would never change and that it could never be restored to something beautiful. But others encouraged her to keep singing and she did, and it made a world of difference!

This advent, I encourage all of us to ask ourselves “what songs has God given us to sing?” Do we believe that our song can be a part of bringing God's new, restored world into being? Isaiah, John, and Selah invite us to believe they can. Like Selah's song, our songs are small offerings to the world, and we can't calculate or have total control over how far our songs travel, but we can keep singing and in singing we can prepare for and embody hope for a

¹ One thinks here of Paul's words in Romans 12:20-21: No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

different world than the one we are living in now. Bloomingdale Mennonite Church might be a small voice in the wilderness, but God's Spirit can use us to prepare the way for the coming restoration. In the meantime, our songs can help tune our lives into God's rhythm, a rhythm led by the babe whose advent we anticipate this season.

May all of us, then, prepare for this coming one by singing songs of peace in defiance of a world at war; may we all sing songs of peace to prepare room in our noisy lives for God's spirit to give us wisdom and knowledge and courage; may we all sing songs of peace to prepare for a different world led by a different ruler – may we sing Isaiah's Song, John the Baptist's Song, sing Selah's Song, and by God's grace, may we Sing a New World into Being. AMEN.