

PEACE THAT DISTURBS

Isaiah 9:1-7 & Isaiah 40:1-5
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Community Church, Congregational
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Okay, I'll admit it. When I'm in a hotel, I really like that someone else cleans up after me. After a long day of leading meetings or attending a conference, I love to come home to a freshly made bed, clean towels, and a sparkling bathroom. But in the mornings while I'm getting ready, I always put out the "Do Not Disturb" sign until I leave my room – just to avoid any uncomfortable moments of a housekeeper showing up before I'm ready for company. That means that every once in awhile, I forget to take down the "Do Not Disturb" sign and I come back to the same mess I left behind in the morning. I always think, "Oops, I really meant for them to disturb me once I was ready for them."

Sometimes, we're that way with God. We're okay for God to disturb us when we're ready for it. But other times, we put up the "do not disturb" signs. When I'm feeling fully prepared, I'm excited about discerning a new call to ministry. When I'm feeling self-confident and sure of myself, I'm happy to say "Yes!" to God. But when I'm not so ready, I feel more like that morning traveler opening the door in her pajamas. "I'm not dressed! I'm not ready. I'm really uncomfortable." In life, even my life with God, I am also tempted to put up "do not disturb" signs. Sometimes, it seems safer to go about "business as usual," so I know what I'm doing and feel fully prepared. It seems comforting to resist change that might create a loss in my life. And, honestly, my schedule is already busy enough – God does not really need to add any more to my calendar.

Those attitudes lead to my "do not disturb" sign because that "do not disturb" sign feels like it will keep me safe. But often, it means I'm just sitting around a dark hotel room watching old reruns when I could be sitting out in the courtyard gazing at the stars. Still, there I sit, because the hotel

room is familiar; the courtyard is different in every venue and requires a little more courage than I feel at the end of a busy day. Hanging on to the familiar often seems hopeful and comfortable, comforting even. Keep doing what we've always done, so we know what to expect. Follow along with business as usual, for it will be comfortable and familiar. Resist a change, and we protect ourselves from grief and loss. That seems like a comforting, reasonable plan.

But what if that change would bring us new opportunities? What if a different direction would help us grow and develop in wonderful, new ways? What if looking up at the December night sky might show us a moon as bright as a Christmas star or a meteors shooting across the sky as if they were on the way to Bethlehem? What if mixing up our routine would bring Spirit into the mix and create a whole new recipe to feed our souls?

You may already know the family parable of the young daughter who was cutting off the front and back end of the ham as she prepared Christmas dinner. Her husband looked over from where he was slicing potatoes and asked why she was cutting off the ends of the ham. "I don't know; this is just how my Mom taught me to roast a ham." She thought a moment and commented, "That's really odd that I don't know why." So, she looked on-line for recipes and couldn't find any reference to cutting off the ends of the ham. Finally, she called her mom: "Why did you teach me to cut off the front and back end of the ham when I'm preparing to roast it?" "Hmm" her mom answered. "I don't really remember why; I think maybe it seals in the juices or something." "Mom, I don't think so. I looked it up on the Internet, and no one suggests doing this." "Honey, I don't know; it's just how my mom taught me. Let me call Grandma and ask." And so, the mom called her mom, asked the question, and heard Grandma let out a hearty laugh on the other end of the phone. "Oh, honey, that was just because my roasting pan was too small!"

What if "business as usual" is keeping us squished into a smaller space than necessary?
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What if the familiar isn't so comfortable anymore? What if the known routine is no longer serving us? What if resisting change is preventing us from growing and serving more fully? What if we are cutting off the front and back ends of a life that could be fuller, freer, and more life-giving and nourishing than we've ever known?

Jesus came into this world at a time when his people were trying to live in a very small space. The Jews didn't want Rome to notice them, for fear Rome might destroy them. It seemed safer to focus on narrow rules about following God than to take the risk of listening to God's Spirit and going wherever God led. And so, Jesus came to proclaim comfort not so they could get comfortable, but so they could be brave again. Jesus came as the Prince of Peace, not to wage war in order to assure them of a homeland or ruling over the Roman oppressor; but to invite them be the light of love for all the nations that God's people were originally called to be. But stepping out in faith to move in new directions, grow beyond the confines of a rigid set of rules, and follow in daring new ways where God's Spirit leads means our familiar daily lives and comfortable routines will be disturbed.

This has never been easy for the followers of God. We take a few steps forward, and then we're tempting to take a step back or quit moving at all. Even after escaping slavery in Egypt, the Israelites found themselves yearning for Egypt, where they knew the routine. Every time wandering in the wilderness got hard, they yearned for that familiar place of slavery. Even in the promised land of milk and honey, they would sometimes look back to the familiar days of Egypt, as if those had been golden years, the good old days.

In my second parish, one of my leaders was a retired Vice President from Ford Motor Company. One Sunday afternoon over lunch at his country club, he told us why he preferred to have the pastor's family to lunch on Sundays. During the week, he spent his afternoons on the golf course
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with his retired colleagues; during those games, he had to listen to their laments about the good old days. He explained that most days, he could remain calm just listening to his buddies. But every once in awhile, he would lose his patience and quip back, “Guys, I would not go back to the days when my wife couldn’t be on the golf course with me, and my black buddies were scared to visit our house for fear of being lynched. Those were not good old days, if you ask me.”

Trying to repeat the past doesn’t move us forward. Reminiscing on the good old days as if they were better than these days prevents us from experiencing the goodness of these days, the blessing of each and every day we are given. Comforting ourselves by putting up the “do not disturb” sign may end up trapping us in a dark hotel room when we could be out in the courtyard seeing a meteor shower and a brilliant full moon. In this season of short days and dark nights, Christ comes as a light, to show us the way forward, to invite us to gaze up and look for direction, to ponder the stories of Jesus’ life and see where Jesus’ story might change our story, and to look around with shepherds and innkeepers and a holy family to discover who we might be called to visit or care for or house or celebrate with in this holy season. In this world of trouble and tribulation, Jesus comes as the Prince of Peace to bring peace and comfort.

But, the Prince of Peace does not come to bring easy peace. The Christmas message is not here to comfort us with the familiar. It comes to disturb our peace, to say, “I’m not helping myself or others when I close myself off from the world.” The message of Christmas interrupts our feast to make us ponder: “It’s not right that I’m eating a huge, lavish meal on Christmas day when others can’t feed their children.” Jesus comes to disturb our peace, to say, “Saying you’re a Christian doesn’t matter if it’s just a label.” Saying you’re following God only means something if you’re actually following God. Saying you’re led by the Spirit only makes a difference if you actually allow the Spirit to lead, change your direction, and even guide you in directions you don’t want to go.

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The Prince of Peace comes to disturb our peace. The comfort we are given isn't to make us more comfortable, but to give us the assurance and hope that *we can make* the changes God calls us to make; that *we can do* things differently, even if the old way is more familiar; that *we can make* the world a better place even if we're kind of comfortable with the world the way it is right now.

"Comfort, o comfort, my people" doesn't mean God is going to make us comfortable. It simply means God will not leave us comfortless or alone. Jesus arrives as if God is saying to us, "I am with you even in the most uncomfortable of circumstances." Every time Jesus heals, it is as if God is saying, "I will hold you when you feel you are falling." "I will lead you, even through the valley of the shadow of death." Jesus, our Wonderful Counselor, our Prince of Peace, comes not to bring peace that makes us feel better, but peace that actually *makes us* better and makes our world better by putting God's loving presence at the center of everything. That kind of peace will disturb us; it will make us uncomfortable. This kind of peace invites us to share, even when we don't want to share. This Prince of Peace invites us to love, even those we don't want to love. Christ's mysterious peace comes when we ask for forgiveness, even when we think we did nothing wrong. This sacred peace comes when forgive even when we think someone doesn't deserve our forgiveness. This is the peace that passes all understanding, the comfort that defies all logic, the peace that will surely disturb our peace and yet invite us to a deeper peace, a heavenly peace -- a peace that can cause angels to sing, shepherds to find comfort, and a tiny baby to find nurture and care, even in a world that rejected him.

So, as a Christmas gift to yourself, take down your "do not disturb" signs. Take a risk and try something new. Follow the Spirit and see where it leads. Step out in faith and make amends with an old friend. Go out in your back yard tonight and look up. See if you can't see the last day or so of the meteor shower. Gaze at a moon so big that it looks like the sun. Think about our God
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who is so huge that he can appear in a tiny baby as easily as in a brilliant star. And give thanks for the opportunity to follow that star, to follow that Prince of Peace into a disturbing world with the strength of a mighty God at our side and an eternal Spirit in our lives, walking with us each and every step of the way.

Let us pray.

Prince of Peace, give us courage to take down our do not disturb signs. Open our hearts to your presence so that we might embrace the very different kind of comfort and peace you offer us. Guide our steps with the light of your Spirit, so that we might find our way to Bethlehem, to Christmas, to life with you at our side. In loving gratitude we pray.