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Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
December 7, 2008

I know it may seem a little bit corny, but I would just say that the Bible never ceases to blow my mind. In 2009, we're going to focus on reading the Bible. If that's not something that's never been big to you, I want it to become big to you because there's such richness, there is such depth. Any one of these passages...Imagine someone serving you the finest wine in the world. You wouldn't gulp it down and then rush out of the room. You would linger, you would savor. Or think about some old letter. Perhaps your grandfather wrote you a letter once upon a time. You don't read it and then wad it up and throw it away, Yeah, I read that that. No, you keep it. You treasure it. You read it again. You find new love, new meaning in its words. Just in today's reading, I love this moment in Psalm 85 where it says that steadfast love and faithfulness will embrace each other. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

We have to use our imaginations to think about this sort of thing. So often we're flat-footed in our reading of the Bible, but let us let our imagination soar. The kiss of righteousness and peace. We don't talk about kissing in church very much. You know, we tend in our society to have a salacious view of kissing. We forget that in many cultures, a kiss, it's a greeting, it's a sign of affection. You know, when Lisa and I were getting married. I had to get her grandmother's permission for this. I went and I got on one knee, and I asked Grandmother Stevens, could I have Lisa's hand in marriage. Her hands flew up in the air! I thought, Is she running, is she blessing, what is it? And then she took those hands and she mashed my cheeks like this, and she kissed me on the lips. And we're married. It's a kiss.

The story of the prodigal son, a father has a son. He squanders his living in a faraway land, but when he finally comes home, what happens? The father doesn't say, "I told you not to squander your living." No, the father scoops him up and kisses him. I love the moment when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, comes to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who's pregnant with John the Baptist, and when they greeted each other, did they not kiss each other? When Joseph heard from the angel that he should not put Mary away, but he should still marry her even though she is with child, when he came and accepted her, did he not kiss her? When the Baby Jesus was born, did Mary not kiss him?

I heard somebody the other day actually saying, "Do you remember your first kiss," and I'll bet he was thinking about some romantic interlude from teenage years. I'll guarantee you, your first kiss most likely came from your mother, and your last kiss will most likely will come from a son or daughter in the hour of your death. A kiss. A kiss.

We use our mouth to kiss. We could use our mouth to curse or to criticize, or just to babble on about nothing in particular. But when we kiss, the mouth rather eloquently falls silent and expresses a tender kind of affection. You don't kiss any stranger out there on the street. I hope.

Please don't do this. We kiss those that we have regard for, that we love, that we care. A kiss. Ann Patchett in her novel, Bel Canto, says that a kiss is like a hand pulling you up out of the water, scooping you up from a place of drowning and loneliness into the reckless abundance of air. What's intriguing about this passage is that it doesn't say that when the Kingdom of God comes, you shall kiss each other, or you shall kiss your dog or some other object. No, it says that steadfast love and faithfulness will kiss. Righteousness and peace will kiss. And we resist this. Initially we think, those are just abstract concepts. Those are mere words, righteousness, peace, steadfast love, faithfulness. And this shows how far we've wandered. How flat our imaginations indeed have become. How... I need an adjective for how Walmartized we have become. We're appalled when we see in the news that people are shopping at 5:00 in the morning and they're trampling each other to get into the store, but don't think for a moment that's strange to me. No, this is indicative of exactly the people that we have become. We're the kind of people who are going to consume. We just are. We're not going to be denied. We're consumers. We shall have it. We shall have our stuff. We shall consume. And we think about things like righteousness and peace and steadfast love and faithfulness. And we think, those are just mere words. Those are just mere notions. But yet God has planted them in our soul, hasn't God? You never really get away from it.

I think we have some ideals that are imbedded in our soul, and it comes out interestingly. It's probably never happened in your house, but at the Howell household, I can tell you there's been a few Christmas mornings when all is not love and cheer. How should we say it? There's a little bit of squabbling going on, and what does Father rise up and say? Father says, "You can squabble in August, but it's Christmas! It's Christmas!" This is really effective by the way for stirring up joy in the house. But we have some ideal that it's Christmas. At Christmas there should be peace. There should be love. In World War I, you had people locked in mortal combat against each other, but when Christmas came, instead of lobbing shells and firing guns at each other, first of all a rum cake and then a bottle of whiskey was lobbed across No Man's Land, and then soldiers who the day before had been trying their hardest to kill each other walked into the center and stood and sang together Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, All is bright.

We rise up every year during Christmas, do we not, and we say there should not be hungry children in the world, there should not be children who do not have toys in the world. There should be no one who is hungry or cold in the world. God has planted these truths, these virtues in us. It is why God came. It is why Jesus will return one day. It is all about virtue, and we have lost so much of this, have we not? I love the scene in the novel, Winter's Tale, where he speaks of the virtues, honesty, courage, sacrifice and patience. He says that they are never properly valued until one must lose a great deal for their sake, and then they rise like the sun. Little men spend their days in pursuit of wealth, fame and possessions. I know from experience that at the moment of their death, they see their lives shattered before them like glass. Not so, the man who knows the virtues and lives by them. The world goes this way and that. The virtues remain uncorrupted and incorruptible. There are rewards in themselves, the bulwarks with which we can protect our vision of beauty.

What do you want for Christmas? I'd ask you to want something for Christmas that cannot be purchased at Walmart or online. What you want for Christmas is the realization of the

day of the Messiah and steadfast love and faithfulness will embrace each other. When righteousness and peace will kiss. We believe in these notions in a way, but we think that by chance they might collide with each other, faithfulness and love might collide, but often we think of them as being separate, but in the Kingdom of God they are always one. Love is steadfast, it is faithful, there is peace, it is righteousness during the season of Advent we hope, we hope.

Reverend Shane Page and I were talking the other day, doing some sermon preparation talk, as clergy want to do at times, and we stumbled upon this lovely notion that St. Augustine voiced back in the late Fourth Century. He said that hope has two beautiful daughters. Hope has two beautiful daughters. One is named Anger. Anger of the way things are. The second beautiful daughter's name is Courage. Courage to see to it that things do not remain the way they are. We'll think about anger. Perhaps for Christmas we ask for a little anger, a little indignation over the way things are in the world, the way that things are contrary to God. Or to put a spin on it a little bit differently, instead of anger, let us suggest something else.

Saturday before last was a very cold, rainy day, and my wife, Lisa, suggested that we go to a movie. And we did, we went to see a movie that I had dismissed at a distance. I thought, it's one of those women's movies, The Secret Life of Bees. And it is a women's movie. And it's a men's movie. It's a child's movie. It's wow. I was so moved. It has rattled around in my soul ever since then, and will for some time. So profound, so meaningful. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry or to both simultaneously. It's a story about some grown women who are sisters and when the mother was having them she named them successively by the months of the year. Two of them came as twins, and at that point they were April and May. And April and May were so very close to each other. Their mother said that they were really one soul sharing two bodies. If April got a toothache, May's gum would swell. Whatever one felt, the other felt. But then, April died. And something in May died with her. And her grief over her lost twin sister was intense. It was palpable. But then something else happened. It is as if she birthed a new twin. Her twin was not just her sister who had died, her new twin seemed to be the entire world. She felt whatever the world felt. Some terrible news item would come, and she would weep and she would wail. Someone in the family would say, Oh, I broke up with my boyfriend yesterday, and she would go into a fit of tears. She sorrowed so much. And her family did not know what to do with her, and finally they stumbled on an idea, that in the backyard of their home she could build a wailing wall. You know in Jerusalem, the Jews have a wailing wall. It's the remainder of stones from the Temple that stood the day of Jesus and devout Jews go there to pray. And one of the things they do is they'll write prayers on little pieces of paper and they'll wedge them into the crevices between the stones. I was there a month ago, and I came with little pieces of paper as I prayed there, and I prayed for family and I prayed for friends who I know are going through things, and I put pieces of paper in that wall. There is a little slip of paper in the wailing wall in Jerusalem that says my church family at Meyers Park.

May would go out to the wall when she was grieved by something, and she would write on a piece of paper news items. Someone that she knew that was hurting, she would wedge it into the wall. The wall came to be filled with little pieces of paper.

Let me suggest to you that if we're serious about Christmas, we do some grieving. Christmas is all about drawing nearer to the heart of God. And if we want to draw nearer to the

heart of God, we want to feel what God feels. When God sees hurt in this world, God doesn't say, I'll have another bourbon and get numb and not deal with that. No, God weeps. God feels the ache. God embraces all of those who are suffering and hurting, and if we would be close to the heart of God, we must grieve over the way things are not in sync with God in this world because grief is the beginning of hope. If we cannot grieve the way things are, then we have no hope. But if we can grieve, if we can let some righteous indignation swell up in our soul, then we can hope, then we have as Augustine would put it, some courage.

I love the word courage. In its origin, it means having a wide heart. What happens to us is our hearts get narrowed. Our hearts get constricted. Our hearts have a very narrow range of interest, but when God comes, our hearts are not clamped down in a narrow way. No, our hearts are enlarged. We begin to see the possibilities of God's good work in the world. We don't believe that everything is up to us. We believe that there is a God, and that God is powerful, and that God will come down to Earth again, and God will right all wrongs. God will love. God will heal. There will be righteousness. There will be peace. Oh, there are always realistic cynics who will sneer at such notions, but we remember, we remember the gift of Christmas. When we say there can't be squabbling at Christmas. When we say there can't be the firing of guns at Christmas. When we say there cannot be hungry children at Christmas.

They're ideals, they're virtues, and what we do is we long for the day. We pray for the day. It is our hope that we never for a moment relinquish it. We pray for that day with the wildest imagination that we can muster. We pray for the day when steadfast love and faithfulness embrace each other. When righteousness and peace kiss. And in that moment, instead of babbling on about nothing as we are wont to do, we will fall silent. And there will be a slight touch of affection, and God's Kingdom will dawn, and there will be love, there will be goodness and there will be faithfulness. In that day, we will see the Lord. Amen.