

I. Advanced Organizer

A. My arachnophobia

1. **True confession: I'm not a fan of spiders.** Not really a fan. Now I get that this is kind of an irrational fear. This little creepy crazy things with eight legs do not really have the capacity to harm me in a meaningful way. When I see one in the shower, I don't need to shrink away, and even though I've gotten better through the years at actually taking a deep breath and confronting the spider with my shoe, or just letting it go, I still have the instinct to shrink away. And that's basically the definition of a phobia. A phobia is an extreme, usually to the point of being irrational, fear. In the case of spiders - arachnophobia.

- a) **I'm not alone in the creepy crawly reaction. Arachnophobia number one phobia**

documented around the world, with incidences being particularly high in the West. One study suggested around 30% of women and 18% of men experienced some form of it.

- b) Other phobias in the top 5 around the world: **ophidiophobia (fear of snakes), acrophobia (fear of heights), agoraphobia (fear of open or crowded spaces), and cynophobia (fear of dogs).**

2. Now for most of us, **phobias are more of an annoyance than a major cause of debilitation in our life.** We may feel uncomfortable by the thing we fear, but for most of us, that discomfort has a minimal impact on our daily life.

B. But there are **other sources of fear that are more pernicious.** Fears that are broader, more expansive; harder to pin down to a particular trigger, and thus harder to avoid. I'd argue that these broader fears can have powerful affects on how we interact with the world around us.

1. **Psychologists have been reporting rise in anxiety related disorders in the last several years.**

Teenagers are a particularly significant cohort. Over the last decade, anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services. In its annual survey of students, the American College Health Association found a significant increase — to 62 percent in 2016 from 50 percent in 2011 — of undergraduates reporting “overwhelming anxiety” in the previous year.

2. **Teens aren't the only ones feeling it: Chapman University study** on fear (slide) - fear of government officials, Trumpcare, pollution

3. Sometimes it feels like the media cycles incite fear and anxiety...?

C. **Second week in season of Advent, the season of considering the implications of God's**

“coming” into the world through the presence of Jesus. The season is often marked by considering themes - gifts that Jesus' coming brings with it. And this Advent I'm interested in thinking specifically about what it means for these gifts to come to our particular time and place. “Advent: coming into what exactly?”

D. **Second week is the week to consider the gift of “Peace”. Peace is another concept that can feel on a superficial level like an aspirational sentiment.** Miss America pageant girls longing for “world peace”. But the idea of it actually coming, of us actually experiencing and embodying peace with the coming of God's presence in Jesus is radical, particularly in a world riddled with fear. Today this is what we will consider: Peace Coming Into Fear.

II. **What Is Peace? How does the Bible frame it?**

A. Most of the time **I tend to think of peace as being the absence of conflict.** My kids are fighting. I want to experience peace. I want the fighting to stop and for us to have a little peace and quiet. When I think about global peace, I think the same thing. I want the fighting to stop so we can all just feel safe and secure and live our lives.

1. But this view of peace as the absence of violence or conflict actually misses the holistic positive picture of peace we have described throughout the arc of Scripture.

B. 2 words that are used throughout the Bible for Peace.

1. Hebrew: Shalom

- a) Definition from a Rabbi: *“Contrary to popular opinion the Hebrew word shalom does not mean “peace,” at least not in the English sense of the word. It comes from a Hebrew root-word that means “wholeness.” And what is wholeness? In the Hebraic way of thinking, wholeness is the joining together of opposites. That’s why we say “shalom” when we greet friends and when we wish them farewell. In the most opposite of situations (coming and going) we use the same word, “shalom.” There is a hidden connection to all our comings and goings; they are wondrously linked together. When I come from somewhere, I am going to someplace else. When I realize this, I feel “wholeness,” and that is the source of peace – the knowledge that all my opposing energies are somehow linked and part of a single whole. True peace must have wholeness as its foundation.”* - Rabbi David Zaslow
- b) “wholeness”, holistic wellbeing. A sense of blessing that is more expansive than the absence of violence
 - (1) God gave Moses this blessing for the priests to speak over the people -
 - (a) *“The Lord bless you and protect you;
25 The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
26 The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”*
 - (b) give you wholeness, prosperity, abundant blessing, fulfillment
- c) As Rabbi Zaslow pointed out - This idea of **opposites working together in unity**. Disjointed parts being held together.

2. Greek is similar: Eirene - joining or binding together

3. **Passive Peace vs. Active Peace** - not just a lack of conflict. It’s an active concept of bringing things together.

C. Connection between Shalom/Eirene and the Coming of God in the arrival of Jesus

1. Messianic Hope

a) Isaiah 9: 6 (NRSV)

***(1) For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

(a) The leader to come will bring this capacity of God, Wise Strategist, and Prince of Peace - Governor of Shalom.

(b) Leader not known for their intimidating authority reinforced through violence, but through the **shalom** - the wholeness - they bring to all they govern.

b) Isaiah 11 (NET) - begins with what we looked at last week, continues from there

(1) A shoot will grow out of Jesse’s root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots.

2 The Lord’s spirit will rest on him—

a spirit that gives extraordinary wisdom,

a spirit that provides the ability to execute plans,

a spirit that produces absolute loyalty to the Lord.

...

***5 Justice will be like a belt around his waist,
integrity will be like a belt around his hips.***

6 A wolf will reside with a lamb,

*and a leopard will lie down with a young goat;
an ox and a young lion will graze together,
as a small child leads them along.*

*7 A cow and a bear will graze together,
their young will lie down together.*

A lion, like an ox, will eat straw.

*8 A baby will play over the hole of a snake;
over the nest of a serpent an infant will put his hand.*

*9 They will no longer injure or destroy on my entire royal mountain.
For there will be universal submission to the Lord's sovereignty,
just as the waters completely cover the sea.*

- (2) **Striking images of shalom. Of opposites coming together.** These oppositional forces brought from a place of destruction of one another to harmonious unity.
- (a) wolf and lamb
 - (b) leopard and young goat
 - (c) ox and young lion
 - (d) cow and bear.
- (3) **What are each of these pairs? Predators and prey.** The dominator, and the dominated. It's the circle of life, right? Natural selection. Survival of the fittest. Winners and losers.
- (4) And yet **something about this "natural order" is to be disrupted by the coming of the anointed one.** The predator and prey dynamic is transformed. The elements have shifted. Animals who we think of as acting purely on instinct, unable to be reasoned into "doing the more mature thing" - their very instincts are less powerful than the shalom that this leader brings. Those who are most instinctually in opposition are brought together. And this has implications for fear.
- c) The **text seems to be directly addressing the way that the coming of shalom in its fulness makes fear irrelevant.** vs. 8 - **about a baby/toddler playing over the hole of a snake.**
- (1) **a real concern for parents.** A source of real danger. A frightening image. A very rational fear. May be something we don't fear, most of us are able to protect our kids from snakes, but in a tribal culture where shelter is pretty low tech and snakes are abundant and often poisonous, the concerns that your kid is gonna be bitten by a snake is a very rational fear, with the results being quite tragic.
 - (2) **Michael Pitre has served two tours in Iraq as a marine.** And after coming back he told a producer for NPR's *This American Life* about some of his experiences, and how hard they often are for his civilian friends back home to comprehend. In Iraq, poisonous scorpions are a threat. Many of us would think of them as an interesting oddity, but in Iraq they have been the source of real quandaries for Iraqi families.
 - (a) You see in communities like Fallujah or Ramadi, the military mandated a curfew, so people weren't allowed to drive at night. And it's in a place in the world that's really hot. Power was intermittent, and many families would sleep on the roof to keep cool. Which meant exposure to scorpion bites. For Michael it was a common experience for Iraqi's to come ask him and his fellow Marines, **"What do we do if our child gets bit in the night? Can we break curfew to get them help?"** And the painful reality for Mike and his comrades was that he couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't be shot.
 - (b) In his words: *"The answer you want to give them is, yes, please, bring us your kid. Let us help. The actual answer is you're taking your life in your hands.... a scorpion bite for*

an Iraqi family causes an impossible decision and puts Marines in impossible situations.”

(c) Scorpion bites for an Iraqi family are a very rational fear.

(d) The most terrifying moment in my life was when my child was in danger. *Story of Elliott's appendicitis.*

(3) And this is the point Isaiah is making. **It's as if he's speaking to one of those terrified families in Iraq: your baby will put his hand over the nest of the scorpion and she will be fine.** Nothing bad is gonna happen to her. There will be no evil predator lurking around the corner. You don't have to tear yourself apart with an impossible decision. "They will no longer injure or destroy on my entire royal mountain." It will be an era of wholeness; shalom, peace. This is what the people of God were looking toward when the promised anointed one would come.

d) There's one other image I find provocative in this text - **they are led by a small child.** What is that about? Despite the fact that this is often read at Christmas time, I don't think it's necessarily about a little baby, born in a manger. I believe it's **emblematic of the greater picture this passage is painting of this leader to come and the era of shalom he will usher in.**

(1) **The reversal of roles**, the transformation from predator and prey, from oppressor and oppressed, **is understood even in the way leadership is expressed.** Rather than a warrior king, keeping a false peace by the edge of a sword, we have an image of humility, even weakness. The leader is a young child. The child's vulnerability in this upside-down picture is a source of strength. **Shalom, wholeness is complete.**

D. Which brings us, of course, to Jesus.

1. **Jesus comes in a way that is bereft of any majesty, might, privilege.** There is no royal birth announcement thoughtfully photographed, instagamed and shared ten thousand times over. Everything about the coming couldn't be more humble. A pregnant peasant teenager and her betrothed, a poor couple with a whiff of scandal to them. Jesus comes to a family without secure housing, he's born homeless effectively, for there was no room for them at the inn. The witnesses are a rag tag bunch of shepherds. The throne room where they come to worship God's anointed, a stall for livestock. And that's just the beginning.
2. Remember the story our friend Jill shared with us just a few weeks ago, of **Jesus teaching his followers about leadership...how? By centering the child.** Perhaps he has Isaiah 11 in his mind, when he hears his followers argue about who is the greatest. He hears this debate and he responds that if they wanted to be great in his economy, his way of governing, his kingdom, they needed to become like little children. **"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."** They needed to take on that role of humble leader, not oppressor.
3. **I believe Jesus understood himself to be the governor of shalom, the Prince of Peace.** His ministry did at times cause separation and conflict - think about his experiences with his own family of origin - but even so **it was a ministry that was not marked by dominance or threat of violence, but by modeling a new way of being that brought wholeness to individuals and wholeness to communities.** He modeled it through humility and a call to his followers to accept the same way of self-emptying rather than self promotion that he embodied. It came through teaching a new way of resistance, that did not raise the sword and continue the cycle of bloodshed, but pursued conflict transformation through non-violent means - turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, praying for those who persecute you. Jesus didn't coach his

followers to do these things because he wanted them to be weak, or cow to fear; he knew that **the only way to build true strength was building equitable harmonious relationships**, bringing disparate bodies together, reconciling opposites, predator and prey lying down together.

4. As Paul would later make clear, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were ultimately about that shalom-making work, bringing that which could not be reconciled any other way into unity in himself.
 - a) Speaking of the bringing together of two groups that could not be imagined to call one another family - Jew and non-Jew (or Gentile), Paul says this (Ephesians 2:14-22, NET):
 - b) ***For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, 15 when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, 16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, 18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, 20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.***
 - c) **The work of Jesus is binding together.** That is what he came to do. To bind humanity to one another. To bind humanity to God. To bring the opposites into harmony. To restore us to wholeness. To reconcile us with one another and with the Divine, that we might live abundant **shalom**. And where he left them, he gave his followers a gift. The same Spirit, the shalom-making spirit that dwelled in Jesus was given to those who followed in his footsteps, that we too can be shalom-makers in our communities and in the world around us. Not by force. Not by might. But through embodying the same humility, compassion, and care that Jesus did.

III. So this Advent, in a time of Fear and Division, what does the gift of peace offer us?

A. The gift of Peace brings a **reconciling wholeness to our communities**.

1. **Shalom reminds us of our connectedness to those who seem to be our opposites.**
 - a) Fear calls us to retreat. To hunker down. To protect ourselves. It's a powerful instinct.
 - b) People in power know this and have been using it throughout history to manipulate and reinforce power. To dominate.
 - c) Fear, if exploited, leads to division and divided people are easier to conquer. What do you think Russia was doing so powerfully, and is still working to do through the country? They have found that Facebook is super useful for sewing fear of the other, and that fear leads to deeper division. Division weakens us. We're essentially broken into pieces.
2. **Reconciling wholeness courageously embodied in the face of fear has a transformative power.**
 - a) This is **not just the legacy of Jesus** - it is the legacy of those resisters who brought change to the world around them through non-violent resistance - Gandhi, Dr. King, Nelson Mandela. All of them understood the power of building coalitions through nonviolent means rather than using fear and intimidation to drive people further apart.
 - (1) **Nelson Mendela - "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."** Peace isn't just a political move that one team takes and wins. It comes from working out the tensions together. That's often tedious, painful, long-game work.

- (2) This is essentially what is so problematic about the move our president took this week to move the embassy of the US to Jerusalem. **Effectively choosing a side and using the threat of violence to protect our side. This is not real peace. This is a false peace. True peace can only happen when all parties are given voice, are brought together, are bound to one another.** Until we can find a way to discover connection with those we consider our enemies so that they can become our partners, we can't have shalom.
- (3) One thing that I think has been encouraging in the last year is the number of efforts I have seen people make in different sectors to form real connection across difference. Since last year's election a number of organizations have formed like, "Living Room Conversations", which seek to bring people with different political perspectives in a room together so that face to face they can discover some of what they share rather than simply debating online, all that they disagree with. In her own raunchy and sincere way, Sarah Silverman has taken on a similar aim. It's too soon yet to evaluate the effectiveness in these efforts on the state of public policy, but the longing and commitment these efforts demonstrate on behalf of so many folks to bridge divides through real relationship is hopeful. It speaks to the longing we all have for shalom.

3. The capacity to make shalom with one another is desperately needed in our geopolitical world. Is needed in our hyper partisan world. Needed in our fragmented family systems. And it is needed in our experiences of faith.

- a) Fear has too long been used as a weapon not just by the politically powerful, but by the spiritually powerful as well. No wonder so many are spiritually traumatized.
- b) I believe the world is in need of places of spiritual shalom, communities where diverse people can be brought together in ways that promote wholeness, security, well being. At Haven, we say our desire is to be a community that is safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered. It is through participating in the work of the Prince of Peace that we can actually embody that.

B. The gift of Peace brings a reconciling wholeness to ourselves.

1. Shalom bringing together the tensions within our own spirits.

- a) It's not just our relationships that are broken. We have broken places in ourselves, as well. Our own mix of motives that are hard to reconcile.
- b) Often these things are connected. What we fear in others, what is often the source of conflict we have with others, is what we have inside ourselves.
- c) It's real that we are not yet living in the day where all the lions can lay down with the lambs. There are legitimate sources of fear in our lives that are completely rational. And as followers of Jesus we feel the tension between these fears and our desire to trust in God. There's a tension in our mind and spirit. We feel the tension between hoping in the kingdom that will come, while still recognizing our vulnerability living in a world in which it has not yet fully come.
- d) I believe God wants to help us do that work of bringing us into wholeness, of holding us together amidst the tensions.

(1) "Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

- e) What I love about this little precept is that it's not prescribing a shallow mental exercise. And it's not just a *Hakuna Matata* - no worries, don't worry be happy ethos either. **This is an invitation to shalom. To connecting the tensions within us.** It's an invitation when anxiety and fear start to cycle in our mind, to enter the space with the Divine where we can bring the

tensions to Jesus. We can bring our real concerns, the fears that keep us up at night, as well as the thanks in our hearts for all that is good, all the experiences of blessing we've received as children of God, we can bring all the mix of those things, and Jesus can help us hold them. Wholeness, eirene, shalom can happen within us. And as Paul says, that shalom becomes like a guardian for our fragile hearts. It protects our spirits from being so vulnerable to every fearful encounter. Like the followers of Jesus who found themselves terrified on the water in the midst of a rocky storm, Jesus' capacity to silence the waves reminds us who is in our boat.

(1) My experience in the waiting room, Jesus did that with me. Sat with me in the tensions - all the gratitude I had for the blessing of my wonderful boy, all the hope I had for the baby girl in my belly just weeks away from birth, all the vulnerability and helpless-ness my spirit felt as my son was in another room on an operating table. Jesus could sit with me in all of that and let it all be true. Hold the tensions together. And in that, there was comfort. There was shalom. There was peace.

IV. End with some sort of contemplative experience of this.