



And Now a Word From Our Prophets:
“A NEW VISION OF SHALOM”

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Scripture: Jeremiah 6:1–14

Flee for safety, O children of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem! Blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and raise a signal on Beth-haccherem; for evil looms out of the north, and great destruction. “Prepare war against her; up, and let us attack at noon!” “Up, and let us attack by night, and destroy her palaces!” For thus says the Lord of hosts: Cut down her trees; cast up a siege ramp against Jerusalem. This is the city that must be punished; there is nothing but oppression within her.

Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I shall turn from you in disgust, and make you a desolation, an uninhabited land. To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen. The word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.

But I am full of the wrath of the Lord; I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out on the children in the street, and on the gatherings of young men as well; both husband and wife shall be taken, the old folk and the very aged. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

The Academy Awards are one week from tonight. And this coming Thursday we will enjoy our annual Jesus at the Oscars night, reviewing the movies nominated for an Oscar. So, trivia question: The Academy Awards for the year 2000 for best picture, best screenplay, best actor, and best director went to what film? Some of you remember: *American Beauty*. With these high awards, the cinematic experts are telling us that this is a well-worded, well-crafted message that is worth the attention of viewing adults.

Now, if you hadn’t been to a film since *Bambi*, you would have found the story of *American Beauty* very disturbing. But that doesn’t make it a bad film. It’s an important film with a harsh and powerful message. The story is about a husband who is an advertising executive, a wife who’s a residential real estate broker, and their high school daughter. They live in a substantial suburban home. They drive nice cars. They have no material want. They have it all. And yet it’s all a lie. They despise each other. Lester, the husband, is fed up with his working life, and with the hypocrisy and lack of meaning in his life.

When his company lets Lester go, he begins to shirk all responsibility. He buys a hotrod car, and when his wife challenges him, he holds the TV changer defiantly over his head and announces, “I rule!” Carolyn and Lester only communicate about errands to be done. Neither cares about the problems of the other. Carolyn becomes enamored with another man. Daughter Laura, totally miserable in this house with nice shrubs on the outside and an emotional vacuum inside, seeks solace with the strange, very troubled kid next door.

On the outside, you would think they have it all. Yet, on the inside of their lives, all is not shalom. The title, *American Beauty*, is scathing in its sarcasm. It holds up all the things we regard as beautiful – good looks, good jobs, good wealth, good house, good cars – and shows that they’re all empty without love, without purpose, without sacrifice.

The contrast between image and reality is startling. Strange as it may seem, this is the type of situation the prophet Jeremiah confronted in his land almost three thousand years ago. He said that everyone was going around saying, “We have peace! We have peace! Things are wonderful!” But the truth was, they did not have God’s shalom.

What did Jeremiah see in the prosperous, peaceful land of Judah? Jeremiah saw the government taxing the poor and taking advantage of defenseless widows and the defenseless throughout the land. He saw evil men who laid traps in order to rob others. He saw idolatry everywhere he turned. So while other people proclaimed peace and comfort to the King, Jeremiah saw injustice and idolatry rotting the nation at the core. He said, “They act as if my people’s wounds were only scratches. All is not shalom.”

Now peace, in Jeremiah’s vision, is more than the absence of violence. One Old Testament word for peace meant “to be at rest.” And perhaps Judah was “at rest.” But the word most frequently used for peace is “shalom,” which is the active presence of God resulting in wholeness of life – and shalom is the word Jeremiah uses. Shalom is life – full life – as God intends. Shalom is a social order in which justice and prosperity are assured for all, basic needs are met and the powerless are not exploited, where God’s presence is the bedrock of well-being and peace.

So, here’s the paradox that Jeremiah confronted in his land. People in authority thought everything was peachy-creamy. They were not at war. They were relatively prosperous. Everything was “just fine.” Yet because this peace was built on injustice and oppression, Jeremiah said it was like a house built upon the San Andreas fault where enormous forces are quietly balanced for explosion. Such a false peace, he said, will blow you away. Jeremiah takes to the streets with a warning that God is going to make war against them. Hear his words:

I am full of the wrath of the Lord; I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out on the children in the street, and on the gatherings of young men as well; the old folk and the very aged. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

I prefer the more accurate translation: “All is not shalom.” For not everything that passes for ‘peace’ is the Shalom of God. It is not simply the absence of violence that makes for peace. It is

the presence of justice, concern for the least and the last, for the widow and the oppressed – that’s what gives birth to shalom.

The prophet, Jeremiah, says whoever is blind to the need for justice and fullness of life for all people is, in effect, saying “No” to God and “No” to peace. Elsewhere we are warned against those who go about crying “Lord! Lord!” but the Lord does not know them because they do not feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or house the homeless, or care for the ill. Jeremiah says that whoever is heedless to the pain of the poor and oppressed is saying “No” to peace – God’s peace. Peace is more than the absence of conflict. Peace is more than the period between wars or the unholy calm that exists after great violence. Peace is not well-being founded upon injustice or exploitation. Peace is more. Not all that passes for peace is Shalom.

Now, in the face of Jeremiah’s thunderous pronouncement, the remarkable thing is that each and every one of us can make a difference for peace. We may tell ourselves that this peace is beyond us, however we can look at the examples of countless people who by their simple actions worked to bring God’s shalom into the world.

Have you ever hear of Charles Finney? In the late 1830s, Finney came to preach in Oberlin, Ohio, a very conservative town where there was slavery. If you were a slave and came to Sunday services there, you were directed to the far back of the balcony. But Charles Finney preached not only the good news of God’s grace, he preached the good news of reconciliation. And one morning he announced, “From now on, in this church anyone can sit anywhere they choose!” That may not seem like much to you – although I know many of you have pews right here that you’re wedded to – but I want to tell you, at that time in Oberlin, Ohio it was revolutionary. The outsides of the pews in many old churches are numbered from the time in which the budget was raised by “pew rentals” – that’s when you really “owned” a pew. So, in making that startling proclamation, Charles Finley upset the existing social and economic conventions, and he worked for shalom.

If you haven’t heard of Finney, surely you’ve heard of John Wesley. John Wesley preached inner renewal and social transformation. When Wesley saw thirty thousand orphan children homeless on the streets of London, when he saw dogs and cats being tortured for sport, when he saw hospitals that chained people to the walls, and when he saw factories with no rules to protect workers, often with children who worked 15 hour days, Wesley said, “If we read the Bible correctly, in the light of Jesus Christ, we must address these issues.”

Wesley took on these issues so intensely, so forcefully, that all thirty thousand children were taken in by families and adopted; factories developed rules including child labor laws; hospitals were built providing proper care; and instead of being tortured, animals became pets. What Wesley did was work for justice and compassion, and in so doing, historians say that by bringing about dramatic social change, he prevented the violent revolution that occurred in France.¹

Have you made the acquaintance of John Woolman? Woolman was born in 1720, one of 13 children in a Quaker family. As a young adult he worked as a shopkeeper for a baker, and later for a tailor and cloth merchant. In 1742 Woolman was chosen as a leader of his Quaker meeting, but he continued as a tailor. Woolman’s life began to change when the tailor for whom he first

worked sold a slave and asked Woolman to write a bill of sale. Woolman felt that slavery was wrong, but did not feel he could disobey his master. With a troubled conscience, he reluctantly wrote out the document.

Several years later, John Woolman, because of his writing skills, was asked to write a will for a gentleman that included the disposition of many slaves. Though he feared to offend the man and lose his business, Woolman refused to draw up the will. When Woolman explained his refusal, the man heard his heartfelt religious convictions and agreed to free all of his slaves by manumission. At that point, Woolman gladly agreed to write the will.

John Woolman died in 1772, but because of his action the yearly Friends meeting directed that those who still refused to free their slaves should be disowned by the Society of Friends. In 1790, the Society presented petitions against slavery to the first Congress of the United States. By a simple action, John Woolman had quietly changed the world.

Such people as Woolman and Wesley and Finney, and countless others, help us to see how we too can bring about God's shalom. We start by learning to pay attention when the Spirit troubles our spirits and moves us, by being willing to risk what is right to do, and finally by backing up our convictions by the way we live. Shalom comes from personal transformation which externalizes in works of justice and mercy. You are giving birth to God's Shalom when you:

- \$ volunteer at Cass Community Services,
- \$ travel with Art & Soul or StreeThreads to minister at Central United Methodist in the heart of Detroit,
- \$ help deliver food at Baldwin Center in Pontiac,
- \$ serve in the Brightmore Free Store,
- \$ go on a mission trip to Costa Rica or Haiti,
- \$ take dinner to the Ruth Ellis Center,
- \$ provide lunch for "hungry?" for high school students,
- \$ make time to see the movie *Mary and Martha* for our Imagine No Malaria campaign,
- \$ support the Partners in Mission offering at Easter, or
- \$ even if you just buy a pancake next Sunday for Habitat for Humanity.

Peace is not an intangible dream outside of and above your hands. When you do these things, you are working for God's Shalom. You are bringing fullness of life to those whose lives are so empty. Shalom is not an inner tranquility which buries its head in fear of the world's realities, rather it reorders our priorities and empowers us to pursue them. The living Spirit of Jesus gives us the power to live justly. When we refuse to believe in the power of this reality, we become the ones who say "no" to peace.

Now, I don't pretend to come before you with any one prescription for what you must do to be part of God's shalom. I just know you've got lots of possibilities and you'll find many of them at the tables and Connecting Ministry kiosk in Fellowship Hall. This congregation makes it so easy not only to feed yourself but also to feed and serve others. All it takes is for you and me to take that first step – and sometimes we're almost afraid to take that step. Old Jeremiah wasn't intimidated by much, I'll tell you that. He surely wasn't afraid of his king. But Jeremiah did have

an honest appreciation of God's justice reigning down without restraint upon those who abuse and oppress others. We used to call this "the fear of the Lord." God is more to be feared and obeyed than any earthly power. And it's only when we're willing to let God be our God that we find the courage to work for Shalom.

Let me give you one final example of having courage to work Shalom. It comes from the very land about which Jeremiah was so concerned to see justice done. The Coalition of Women for a Just Peace is a coalition of over ten Israeli women's groups which is working to lift the siege the Israeli army has laid to many cities and villages in the occupied territories in the West Bank. One time, the Israeli army had dug trenches across the roads, making them impassable by cars. This served no security function – it simply prevented Palestinians from having access to each other, not to Israel. Members of Just Peace went to a village under siege to physically fill in the trench, thereby making the road passable. At the perimeter of the village, they marched with their shovels and hoes toward the trench, blocked by a line of soldiers. However, the soldiers didn't open fire, and Just Peace easily passed through and swarmed all over the trench, trying to fill it up. Half the group broke away to work on filling up a second trench. Then the soldiers confiscated every single tool they had brought, and arrested four of them.

In response, they all got down and with their bare hands began to scratch out handfuls of dirt and rocks, and throw them into the trenches. Some of the Palestinian children from the village came out and joined them, and they worked together in the hot sun for hours. And when it was over, everyone was amazed to see that they had filled in both trenches, and made the road passable.ⁱⁱ

That's how shalom will come to our world: it comes one determined handful at a time by those who have a vision of God's peace which fills them with courage and hope. Peace won't come by fighting an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth until everyone is toothless and blind. It will come through those who aren't afraid to knock down dividing walls, working together as God's people.

Those of us who are followers of Christ must surely know that Jesus embodied God's shalom in all of his life. He demonstrated shalom by physically and spiritually healing broken people, by confronting the principalities and powers of his day with the reality of God. He told stories about how God's peace broke down barriers between people like Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles. He preached and taught shalom time and again. He was a living example that peace is deeply rooted in the justice, generosity and love which God desires for us all.

The Catholic Bishops and many others are right when they say, "If you want peace, work for justice," but ultimately there is neither peace nor justice apart from Jesus Christ. He is our peace. His Spirit breaks down the dividing walls of hostility.ⁱⁱⁱ And he must live within us for the shalom of God to envelop our world.

May we pray? Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is sadness, joy. Make us instruments of shalom, through Christ our Lord.

i.J. Warren Breedy, a secular historian, wrote in the book, *England Before and After Wesley*, “England was spared the bloody revolution of France because the followers of John Wesley transformed society. Wesley returned to England its soul.”

ii.Gila Svirsky, Women work to end the siege of Palestine, Peace Notes, Summer 2001

iii.Ephesians 2:4