

"Salvation's Kiss"

Psalm 85

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"Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other." Righteousness and peace—they *kiss*. I don't know about your worship experience but in mine there's not that much kissing. Heather and I exchange a peck sometimes when the peace of Christ is passed, but by and large worship has been for me rather smooch free. But not today! There's kissing going on—peace and righteousness, they kiss.

I guess there are weddings, though. Interesting—I don't think I've ever been to a kiss-free wedding. It's the kind of thing a preacher hates to admit, but I think the kiss between bride and groom might be what many like most about a wedding. No one goes to a wedding for the preaching. No folks are thinking, "Come one preacher, bring it home. Let's get to the vows! I want to see the lovers smack lips!" Out at the reception hall the guests all clink their glasses, and it's not a cue for the pastor to stand and say a little more. No, the people want another canoodle!

If a picture is worth a thousand words, I don't know what a kiss is worth. A hundred "I love you's over the phone" don't add up to one good kiss. It's one thing to tend to a child's skinned knee with Band-Aid and Neosporin, but there's something about that kiss that makes it all okay. Maybe it's how close you have to be to put lips on another. In that moment you're together, giving and receiving, open, vulnerable, united somehow in a way that goes beyond the physical touch. With an earnest kiss on the top of the head, the cheek, or square on the lips, all can just seem well. Righteousness and peace, they kiss.

It's quite a collision, this union. Among Scripture's big words "peace" and "righteousness" are at the top of the heap. "Righteousness," a word getting at what things are like when God's policies are enacted on earth. "Right living," I guess you could say—people's thoughts, words and deeds in line with all that makes God smile. And "peace" (in Hebrew, *shalom*) is a word so heavy with meaning you need a forklift to carry it around. It's not just about absence of conflict but the full presence of well-being—people whole in soul and body, not knowing lack or dissatisfaction, justice established, hopes fulfilled.

"Righteousness and peace will kiss each other." *They will*, the psalmist assures. The psalmist is a lot like us, or at least a lot like me, looking for righteousness and peace in the world and hearing a lot of glass clinking, but not seeing a lot of kissing.

"The Lord promises peace to his people," prays the psalmist. Advent is a season of promise. Our imaginations fill with visions of wolves lying down with lambs, swords beaten into plowshares and textbooks on war gathering dust, people walking in

darkness squinting at the brilliance of the light. Such wonderful promises, all this! So lovely to think of a world where this is the case!

Advent dreams of the world's restoration. What will creation be like, it asks, when nothing exists that does not please the Lord? It looks to the day when God's unfailing love has fully had its way and we ourselves and all that's around us only makes God clap and jump. Advent looks to a time when people's faithfulness to God is as common as dandelions in May—just springing forth from the earth! Advent anticipates a world when people won't worry about the future—will we have enough, what will come of the illness, how do I know that my tomorrows will contain reason to rejoice?—because the only harvest life will yield is God's bumper crop of blessing.

But things aren't like this yet, neither for the world nor us ourselves, which makes Advent sort of an awkward season. Advent speaks as though the world is in a growth spurt, on its way to maturity toward the day when it will move only with grace, like a dancer whose every move is art. But as it is now, all gangly in sin, our world and all its people can't help but misstep and trip, fall down, and walk with a limp. "Won't you revive us, God? Won't you save us?" asks the psalmist. Won't you give us a fresh start?

A while back I was in a conversation about mentors in the faith. We were looking over lives for people who embodied righteousness. We all came up with one or two, but none of us dared put forward ourselves. I know my life would be quite different if righteousness were mature in me—my love more unreserved, my mouth tasting only of words that bless, my showing of Jesus' mercy and justice a little more costly. It feels like the rightness of my living always seems stuck in the awkward stage.

And as for peace, wholeness, well-being through and through, we might laugh with joy at the thought of our selves and our world like that, except we might laugh till we cried. The week's news of ongoing debt crises, airstrikes, sanctions, the sad-same struggles of the jobless all say that the lips of lasting peace haven't yet touched the cheek of our waiting world.

This is why John the Baptist is a major player in Advent each year. He busts on the scene in his leather belt and camel hair, preaching with locust breath: "One is coming, one is coming! Prepare the way of the Lord!" It's a New Day kind of message. Like the world is under mistletoe and God is leaning in. Prepare for this, people! Prepare!

John's was "turn around and get cleaned up" kind of message. John was clinking his glass—the Messiah was coming! This one who would kiss the leper clean, embrace the lost and brokenhearted, be the glory of God dwelling right here with us.

I don't know, maybe preparing to receive the Messiah is like a couple preparing for a wedding kiss. They come to premarital counseling and do some hard truth telling about their lives. They turn around in the way they talk to one another. They name the

follies they've lived and say, "Let's not do that anymore," God's not making a forever that's about that! They forgive and envision a more excellent way of walking together in love. There's a lot of preparation—or at least there should be—behind a nuptial kiss.

My family and I have been doing a lot of preparing the past two months. Part of our getting ready to come here was saying goodbye to where we had been. One of the goodbyes I said was to a favorite coffee shop. It was a small town joint with a really good cup and great people behind the counter.

On my last visit I went in, ordered my drink and talked over the move we were to make. Yeah, I'm going to be the pastor of a church in Ohio, on the east side of Cleveland. It's a great area, welcoming people, has good coffee-drinking weather. I'd given the schpiel enough times by then it had almost become rote. But this time the script got broken.

I reached out to shake hands and my friend at the register took my hand, pulled it in *and kissed it*. I was stunned. It was a rather chaste kiss but all the same, it bordered on impropriety—there were people in line behind me! Yet as I walked out the door, I felt honored. Still a little taken aback, but also turned around, like I wanted to love more earnestly the next person I met. Be more watchful for how I might do more justly in my living, moving and being. Live with more hope that God's peace may not be as far from our world as it can seem.

We're about to share a meal. It gives witness to the one whose right living and ministry of peace earned him a terrible kiss. An ugly, betrayal kiss that he returned by taking a cross so righteousness and wholeness would take hold in the world and be ours forever.

We eat this meal more mindfully than we do the bag of chips in our cupboard at home. We eat it aware of its promise of the heavenly day when the Lamb that was slain will have made lasting peace among conflicted peoples of earth. We come to it mindful of our need to turn from ways out of keeping with the kingdom our Lord is bringing in.

And as our hearts ring with Psalm 85, we eat with heightened awareness that when we take these signs of body broken, love poured out, God's peace made with us, the way we receive this grace is right on the lips. Amen.

This sermon was preached at Christ Presbyterian Church, Chesterland, OH.