

I own a shirt from my college days, and the back of the shirt asks a simple question: "You can talk the talk, but can you row the rock?" You can talk the talk, but can you row the rock?

As I've shared with you before, I was a rower in college--I was on the crew, that body of 8 women who worked for hours each morning before the rest of the campus was awake, plying a long thin boat through the waters of white rock lake in Dallas. Our lake was notorious. It wasn't like other places where rowers row, no, usually rowers choose rivers, especially rivers with steep banks that will protect the water from the wind, because for rowing, for this sport that relies on precise, consistent movement, the last thing you want is choppy water. But on White Rock Lake, there was only choppy water. All we knew were waves that slapped our oars and tossed our narrow boat from side to side, white caps even on some days, waves that at times came right up over the gunwales and tried to sink us. And so we lamented, how are we supposed to row in such rough water? How are we supposed to be steady and flawless when we are being tossed around? How are we to glide peacefully through this, when all around us, there is chaos?

How can there be peace here? How can there be peace now?

Perhaps it is a timeless question, I don't know. But it certainly is a timely question. How can there be peace?

How can there be peace at a time when the pain and the fear and the injustice and the shame caused by racism, by sins known and unknown, are flashing before us, on the television and deep within our own memories? How can there be peace when all we see is conflict, civil wars, corruption, political posturing and paralyzing partisanship, fear-based economics, fear-based everything? How can there be peace when cancer eats its way through our hopes and dreams for the future? How can there be peace when every day I wonder if we'll be able to hold this family together? How can there be peace when every night I wonder if I can hold myself together? How can there be peace?

And yet, today we light the candle of Peace. And yet, today we gathered and greeted one another with words of "Peace," and "Peace be with you." I confess that the words of the prophet echo in my head and I wonder if he speaks of us: "They say peace, peace, when there is no peace."

Jerusalem was sacked in 587 BC. The temple was destroyed, the city was ravaged. The people were torn apart, and they were torn away from the land that God had promised them. The dream had not faded, no instead the dreamers had been wrenched from sleep and robbed of the dream God had given them, the dream of being a people, God's holy nation. The leaders and many of the people were led away to Babylon for a generation.

There was no peace.

It was the exile; it was the period that gave rise to the entire book of Lamentations. In the first two chapters of that book, we find Jerusalem personified, and given the name of Zion--Zion, the unfaithful daughter of God. And in these chapters Zion cries out against the horrors of her destruction. She hurls accusations at others, at God, and she repeats this refrain: there is no one to comfort me. No one to comfort me, no one to comfort. No peace.

But with Isaiah's voice, God breaks the silence: Comfort. Comfort ye, O Comfort my people.

They have paid enough, they have endured enough, enough punishment, now is the time for comfort. Now is the time for promise--prepare the way--the one is coming, the time is coming, to lift up valleys and bring down mountains, to level the playing field, to smooth out the bumps. The choppy water will be calm like glass; the wind and the waves will do as he says, and be still. Life will be more "tranquil river," and less "White Rock Lake."

Comfort. O Comfort my people.

There will be Peace. And it will not happen because of us. Peace will not come because we find a solution. Peace will not come because we outsmart our enemies or overcome our fears. Peace will not come because of our protesting, and it will not come because of our wars; it will not come because of our good will and our good intentions. No, peace cannot come because of us, and Isaiah knows it--God says to the prophet, "Cry out!" and Isaiah retorts but what shall I cry? What do I say? What could possibly change anything--the people are grass, their constancy is like the flowers of the field--it withers, it fades. And then you can hear God respond: Ah, yes, Isaiah, you are right about that--the grass withers, and the flower fades--the people are fickle; they are unfaithful, and they don't know what they really want. They cannot make peace, but Isaiah, peace is not up

to them. The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. Peace will not come through us, but through God. As Paul says in Ephesians, "For He is our peace, he has made two groups one, he has brought down the wall between them." Peace is not ours to claim; it has been wrought for us, and God has promised to bring it in full.

And so we wait. We work amidst the chaos; we row along with the waves. And we long, and yearn, and eagerly await the gift of peace. Our lives are an advent--a long wait through a season full of frenzy. And sometimes the waiting seems unbearably long. The other day my son and I were talking about Advent and he noticed that this year something is different in our house. "'You know what I miss?' he asked. 'I miss the little thing with the door for every day, where we open it and there's a piece of chocolate.' Ah, the Advent Calendar? I asked. 'Yeah, the Advent Calendar,' he said. 'It's a loooong time waiting for Christmas without a little bit of chocolate each day.'"

Indeed it is. Peter reminds us in his epistle that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. It is difficult to be patient in a time without peace, to trust in the promise that is coming. But perhaps God gives us a little bit of chocolate each day. Perhaps God gives moments--moments of peace between warring nations and warring families. I am reminded of the Christmas Truce of 1914, early on in World War I, when German and British soldiers climbed out of their trenches and met in the middle. They exchanged greetings, they mingled with one another and exchanged food and souvenirs; they held joint burial ceremonies and swapped prisoners; by some rumors there were even games of football, what we would call soccer, shared between them, and several meetings ended in carol-singing. A moment of peace; a little shard of peace, a piece of chocolate, perhaps, in a world waiting for Christmas.

It's what we seek each day; a moment to step out of the madness, to reach out of the chaos, and savor a sweet moment of peace. To grasp a hand with the grip of great love; to speak and receive words of forgiveness, with God, with one another; to stretch out a hand and find it filled, not with chocolate, but with bread--with grace for the journey, and for the day. Moments of peace; moments when the promise of peace is real, and tangible, right before us, when we tap into the steadfast, faithful promise of God: Christ, our peace, will come again.

I'm going to invite you now to do again what we began to do earlier--to speak to one another, sharing with each other the signs of peace--a handshake, a hug, the

words "Peace be with you." Speak aloud to one another, be heralds of this promise, the promise of Christ's peace, even when it seems there is no peace. Won't you stand once again, and greet one another with signs that the peace of Christ is with us.

Summary: In a time when there seems to be chaos all around us, we yearn for a peace that we cannot create. We look around us to find signs of peace that Christ gives, and we trust that one day He will bring a kingdom of peace in full.