

Serving God's Mission of Shalom

This morning we begin a story telling series on Shalom's history of serving God's mission, sharing in community, and following Jesus. We start with looking at the big picture of God's mission of shalom.

A number of people told me, "You're going to love it in Ann Arbor!" They were right. I love it here. What do you love about this city? [Responses...]

As a newcomer, I notice beautiful homes, a prosperous city, cultural diversity, and exceptional green spaces. Who can tell me what's featured in Ann Arbor's logo? [Burr Oak] Ann Arbor is called "Tree Town" for the dense urban forest in its parks and residential areas. The amazing tree canopy here is what first impressed me as someone who pays attention to urban forestry. Tree canopy cover is a barometer of the health of a community's natural system. But did you know that there's a direct correlation between urban canopy and a city's economy? Satellite imagery reveals poverty and prosperity simply by tree canopy. Ann Arbor has 33% tree cover—well above most Midwest cities and a stark contrast to 18-22% for Detroit.

Ann Arbor is a bubble of abundance. A sharp contrast to Detroit, a display of world need. Let's take these two cities for what they represent and the mission of God. Detroit is a display of awful decline and a world of need. Once upon a time Detroit was one of the largest and wealthiest cities in America. Today it's lost over half its population and is the largest city in U.S. history to file for bankruptcy. Within a landscape of urban decay, Detroit has some of the highest rates of unemployment, poverty, racial conflict, and violent crime in our nation. It suffers poor housing, poor services, poor education. Of course there are many wonderful places and transformations in Detroit, but as a whole the city is a desperate picture of what many suffer in the world: poverty, injustice, and insecurity.

In sharp contrast to the fall of Detroit is the rise of Ann Arbor—a bubble of abundance. Ann Arbor is frequently reported to be among the best small cities and top places to live in America. According to the Gallup-Healthways Well Being Index survey, Ann is rate #6 of all U.S. cities. Why? Because of its strong economy, exceptional education, security, health care, cultural diversity, the green belt around the city and green spaces within the city, and for all the other things you say you love about this place.

Now let's step back from our cities and consider what God is doing in the world. God intends is that all people everywhere enjoy the kind of

abundance experienced here in Ann Arbor. But the reality for most people in the world out of our view is closer to Detroit than Ann Arbor. This is far from what God wants in the world. God's great project or purpose is to establish shalom. If we only had one word to express God's project or purpose, God's mission and vision, it would be "shalom"—that is, to create a peaceable order with abundance, security and justice throughout the earth.

Let's go back to the text we looked at a couple weeks ago. In Genesis 12 we read of God's intention for the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* What does God want to do? Bless this people. But it doesn't stop there. With the phrase "so that you will be a blessing" we have an instrumental blessing. God wants to bless this particular people and through them bless all people of the earth. The bumper sticker has it right: "God bless the whole world, no exceptions."

What does God's blessing look like? Abundance. Picture the Garden of Eden, A land flowing with milk and honey. Fruitful fields. Feasts of food and wine. The City of Heaven. But human greed and fear destroy God's blessing of abundance, creating instead scarcity, insecurity, injustice and violence. Enter the prophets to proclaim God's plan to establish shalom. We have a clear picture of the problem and of God's shalom in Ezekiel 34.

The prophet describes the problem: *"Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, clothe yourselves with their wool, and slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them."*

Witness the greed. Witness the rule of force. Witness the neglect and injury. Not just a problem back then in the Ancient Near East. This continues in communities all around the world. God cannot and will not stand for this.

God acts: *"Thus says the Lord, I am against the shepherds... As shepherds seek out their flocks... so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from the places to which they have been scattered... I will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains, by the watercourses... I will feed them with good pasture... they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,*

but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” See what God intends to restore the blessing, to provide abundance, to create security, to establish justice.

The next verse is interesting in this election season. *“I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them.”* Note the role of public servants. Those who govern are to shepherd in ways that all are fed, cared for, and secure. The prayer for the coronation of Israel’s king in Psalm 72 provides a job description for a nation’s leaders:

*Give rulers your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to them.
May they judge people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May they defend the cause of the poor and
give deliverance to the needy...
May justice flourish and shalom abound...*

In God’s plan, political leaders are to ensure that justice flourishes and shalom abounds. Keep this in mind when you cast your votes next month.

Ezekiel goes on to describe God’s shalom, picture of what wants in the world: *“I will make with them a covenant of shalom... I will make them and the region a blessing; and I will send down the showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations... they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them splendid vegetation, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land...”*

Again, get the picture of God’s shalom? The blessing of abundance, security and justice for all. That’s the social dimension of shalom. And there’s a spiritual dimension: *“They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they are my people, says the Lord GOD. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.”* This God wants to be known. The word is *yada*—an intimate relationship of knowing this God as Shepherd, Presence, Provider, the One who loves and blesses.

In our NT Jesus enters this picture to embody God’s love and serve God’s shalom as the Good Shepherd. What did he say of his mission? *“I came that*

they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10.10). He took up the cause of God’s shalom when he read from Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of [Jubilee].”* Jesus advances the prophetic vision of shalom in all he said and did. But adds a personal touch of God’s love. In the interactions of Jesus with people we see the healing power of love that brings about freedom, health and wholeness. So we see in the mission of Jesus the full scope of God’s vision of shalom: an abundant life of freedom, love and peace. This is what we are to enjoy and to extend.

Because of the hostile divides between people today, consider how Paul describes the work of Jesus: *“For Jesus is our peace... he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... He has abolished the law... so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”* (Eph 2.14-16). The work of Jesus is about breaking down dividing walls, transforming hostility, and creating one new humanity—all as making peace or shalom.

Last week I saw a wonderful expression of this with “Genesis of Ann Arbor”—a building that both Jewish and Christian congregations share together. These faith communities get what God is doing and have aligned themselves with God’s mission. The Jewish congregation has as their mission to *“...bring near the age of universal peace through acts of righteousness in society at large”* and the Christian congregation has at their mission to *“work for peace, reconciliation, and justice.”* Both have God’s peace or shalom as their mission and on their front yard they have the sign “One Human Family: We support our Muslim and Refugee Neighbors.” What would make this joint church and temple even a more impressive would be to have a mosque in the space with them, holding these traditions of the Book together in one space.

This congregation is also aligned with God’s mission, as it’s name suggests and is written in it’s welcoming statement: *“We at Shalom Community Church strive to fulfill a vision of shalom, to embody the love, compassion and justice of Jesus in our personal and community journeys.”*

This is Shalom Community Church. *Shalom*—what we seek. *Community*—what we enjoy. *Church*—a body following Jesus. When I said this to John Kotre, I loved his response and offer it as our closing invitation: *“Let’s do our name!”* (Next week we will hear stories of Shalom doing its name serving God’s mission.) --Steve Thomas