

## Christmas Peace

Luke 1:67-79    Isaiah 11:1-9

<sup>1</sup> A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

<sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

<sup>3</sup> and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

<sup>4</sup> but with **righteousness** he will judge the needy,  
with **justice** he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

<sup>6</sup> The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.

<sup>7</sup> The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

<sup>8</sup> The infant will play near the cobra's den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

<sup>9</sup> They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

This is the word of the Lord.

Beautiful imagery! As is the imagery from the Luke reading, Zechariah's  
song: he proclaims that Jesus will "give light to those who sit in darkness and the  
shadow of death (a nod to Psalm 23), to guide our feet into the way of peace." I  
love the pathway imagery, the sense of journey, of walking... into peace.

What does peace mean to you, when you hear that word? If you were to draw a picture (or have someone else draw a picture) that reflected your image of peace, what would it look like? If you were being interviewed for, say, a radio or tv program that was discussing peace, what would you say?

For many, peace is primarily an inner peace—peace of mind and heart; a sense of calm. For others it's primarily an outer peace—peace on earth. Most of our spiritual guides and teachers over the centuries say it's both-and. They're not mutually exclusive. In fact, one usually depends on the other.

We continue the journey into the Advent and Christmas seasons, and we want to listen to and sing those carols about peace, carols which we know so well, those carols that most of us learned in childhood—even if we didn't go to church. That's my story. I didn't set foot in a church until I was 18 years old. But I knew all the Christmas carols! They were just in the air, everywhere, at this time of year, at home and at school and on the radio. We love the carols, don't we? Especially the ones that speak of peace; of calmness and stillness; of goodwill to all. Inward peace and outward peace.

We heard and are invited to see those beautiful images of peace from that picture that Isaiah paints for us where there is no more harm or destruction, and

everyone and everything in the created order gets along beautifully. In our candle lighting liturgy, we heard Isaiah proclaim that the coming savior is a “wonderful counselor, mighty god, everlasting father and ...prince of peace.” And that passage goes on to say, “And of his government and of his peace, there shall be no end! Peace will be established with *justice and righteousness* and the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

We hear those magnificent metaphors about peace, also from the prophets, about turning swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, of nations not making war against nation anymore; a wolf shall lie down with a lamb, leopard with a goat, and a cow and a bear shall graze together in the same pasture... Those wonderful, outlandish images! They seem so unrealistic—because wolves eat lambs, leopards eat goats, and bears don’t share a spot at the dinner table with anybody! They *eat* the other ones at the dinner table.

He even says that a little child shall reach his hand into a nest of venomous snakes without getting bitten. This all sounds outlandish, but this is prophetic imagination, prophetic hope and images of peace with the word from the Lord that says, yes, this *is possible*. And it will be accomplished in God’s Kingdom, and in God’s time. This isn’t just wishful thinking.

Then we come to that absolutely gorgeous line: They shall neither harm nor destroy on my holy mountain for the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Ahhhh...

Wouldn't that be nice ... to live in that kind of world? ... Where there was no hurting, no harming, no injuring of other people. Wouldn't it be nice to be that kind of person? Who did not hurt others? And wouldn't it be nice to live in that kind of a home? To live in that kind of family? Or live in that kind of neighborhood? Or in that kind of city or world? Wouldn't we like to live in the kind of world that understood and experienced real peace? All of us long for peace and want to be people of peace.

Yes, we know that Christmas is about peace (and hope, and joy, and love, as the beautiful sheer banners reveal). We sing our Christmas carols about peace and we come to listen to the Advent prophecies about peace. But let's be honest: doesn't it sometimes seem like just a big farce? Just lofty idealism? Because, there is so much hurting in this world. There is so much harming of one another. There is so much division.

I recall the words of Longfellow, in his poem... The first stanza says, "I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet

the words repeat, peace on earth good will towards men.” That is lovely, but here is a verse that Longfellow wrote into that poem which often isn’t recited (it’s the second to last stanza): “In despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said, but hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will towards men.” Longfellow wrote this on Christmas day in 1863, two years into the civil war, when his son was critically wounded and after his wife had tragically died from a terrible accident.

In another stanza he temporarily despairs over the state of a nation at war with itself, and finds himself struggling to hold onto hope, and a vision for peace in the midst of deep division. Does this sound a bit familiar?

Yet what Longfellow struggled with is exactly what we are called to do: to have & exercise hope, as we talked about last week, and see a vision for peace. To use our imagination, along with Isaiah, to picture a future that is marked by peace. Which is probably why, in the Advent tradition, peace follows hope; it’s hard to imagine a peaceful future without first having hope that God will make right what is wrong, and that we can play a part in making it right.

Ann Lamott: “Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don’t give up.”

This kind of hope, then, begets peace.

And peace begins right here with me, and with you. When the Prince of Peace comes to live in us. If the Prince of Peace doesn’t live in me, I don’t know where that peace going to come from. It certainly doesn’t come from within me by my own effort or strength, but by the love of Christ at work in my, and your life. If we want peace, we must become peace, through the Prince of Peace.

We must become irenic. Remember that word? “Eirene” is the Greek word for peace, and it’s where we get this English word irenic. It means, “working toward peace and reconciliation. Becoming peaceful.” And if you know someone named Irene, her name means peace (like the Greek goddess, Irene).

A young woman named Etty Hellesum, who suffered the Auschwitz concentration camp, in her book titled *An Interrupted Life*, says straightforwardly—and with authority as a holocaust victim: “For there to be peace, each of us must turn inwards and destroy, in ourselves, all that we think

we ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.” (repeat) This is so applicable to our time, isn’t it? Now, to restate what she says in a more positive way: each of us contributes peace and well-being to the world every time we choose to *be* peaceful persons, by choosing to name and let go of anything within us that hinders peace.

The primary experience for a Christian is that the Spirit of Christ, and God’s peace and love, living inside of us. Peace begins with me. It begins with you. “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with...” someone else! Because it’s their responsibility! No, let it begin with *me*.

Let’s pause for a moment and remember Jesus’ wonderful promise in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.” So, let’s pause and just take in that promise from Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” An other-worldly gift, breathed into us by the Spirit. Thank you, Jesus, for your peace. Amen.

The other part of becoming irenic, of peace-making is, we begin to work for justice and righteousness. We work to establish justice and righteousness—those

two great pillars of the Old Testament, which Jesus continued in his ministry, in fulfillment of the prophet's words. Any time you read the Old Testament prophets, in particular, you will always see these two words used together. They appear together in our readings from Isaiah 9 and 11.

There is a t.v. commercial that appears every year at this time, and has for years. In this beer commercial, they have two great big workhorses, two big Clydesdales, and behind the Clydesdales is a beautiful sleigh (or carriage, or wagon, depending on which version of the commercial it is). You see the giant horses trotting through the snowy woods, or down a country road, and up to a country house, or some place like that.

That's the way it is with peace. There is one great big Clydesdale and its name is *justice*. There is another great big Clydesdale and its name is *righteousness*. *Behind* the two workhorses of justice and righteousness comes peace. Peace always follows after justice and righteousness, not before. That is true within our family life, the life of our neighborhood, our state, our nation, our world. It's the same everywhere. If we want peace—and I'm talking about outward peace now—we find it *following* the pursuit of justice and righteousness. Although if we work for peace it *can* make us peaceful inwardly.

So, what is this great big workhorse called justice? Justice is the organization of life so that people can be taken care of, fairly. It is the structuring of society, the structuring of our families, our economy and government, our businesses so that people are taken care of. Especially, according to Scripture, the marginalized, the oppressed and the poor, widows, and orphans.

Justice is the desire for fairness within our relationships and in society. People want and deserve to be treated fairly; to not be taken advantage of. It's hard to have peace if we don't have fairness. Justice is a workhorse, and justice is the ordering of society and family so that people are taken care of, and if there is no justice and fairness, peace is difficult to come by within that society or family. For peace always comes behind that great big workhorse called justice.

And there is the other great workhorse, and its name is righteousness. Righteousness is right relationships within our *individual* lives. If justice is concerned about the organization of society, and of fairness, righteousness is concerned about our life relationships—that I would have love and respect and kindness with my family, my friends, my coworkers, my neighbors. And, as much as possible, to be able to do this with *all people*. Romans 12:18 and Hebrews

12:14 both say: As far as it depends on you, pursue peace with everyone! Right relationships with people promote peace.

Righteousness means loving people, because God loves them deeply. Even when they are difficult and temperamental (like I can be at times, and perhaps like some of you can be at times).

Justice. Righteousness. Those two big Biblical words, which almost always appear together, are like strong Clydesdales. Behind them comes the sleigh of peace.

This is Christmas peace, which is so needed. What we need is the peace of Jesus Christ in us, people *in whom* the Prince of Peace comes to live. When the Prince of Peace lives within the manger of our heart, we work for justice and righteousness. Then peace follows along behind, and begins to spread.

I quoted Longfellow, when he wrote in the second to last stanza: “And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will toward men.” But then he continues, and concludes. There is more! Longfellow does *not* leave us on a note of despair.

The next and final stanza reads:

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead nor does he sleep, the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will toward all.” That is where we hang our hope. That God will prevail, right will overcome wrong, God *is* at work. As the Prince of Peace works through his people to establish justice and righteousness.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, forever and ever.