

Let There Be Peace on Earth

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It is Christmas in the year 2006, which is quite unique in more ways than many might imagine. I love this holy night because of what Christ's birth says about God's hope - and ours - for a world crying out for peace. Let's face it, the more entangled America gets in the affairs of the Middle East, the closer all of us get to a clearer look at the meaning of the birth of this promised Savior, who was sent to proclaim what many in the New Testament called *the gospel of peace* - peace on earth, peace with God, peace within. Many themes are central to understanding the Gospel. Grace is *the manner* of God's presence; love is *the how* of God's way among us; but peace is *God's aim* for everything, God's hope for all that is.

Of course, this peace that resides in God's heart - and ours - is more than the mere cessation of overt hostility and outright violence, although that would clearly be enough for now. We'll take it, if peace were to break out beginning in Bethlehem, and spread from there to Baghdad, with quick stops in Darfur, Kosovo, Lebanon, and let's not forget Afghanistan. Peace in the Middle East, peace among those with whom we work and live, peace in our homes, here at church, peace in our hearts: these are the forms of peace that mean the most, and these are the places where our prayers come together crying out for the forces of good and the powers of God to come quickly and stay long.

When it comes to understanding what it is that we long for with our hope for peace, it has become clear to all of us, with three years in Iraq, that there's a big difference, in fact, there's a huge gap between winning the war and establishing peace. The war's over, but that doesn't mean that people are willing to live in peace, or that people know how to live in peace. That's the key, and that was the key for Jesus, too, when he tried to proclaim his gospel of peace. He knew that it wasn't primarily about distinguishing between friends and enemies. That's why he calls us to love our friends and our enemies alike. [Luke 6: 27-36] He knew that it wasn't primarily about having enough, or not needing more. That's why he invites us to get our minds off such basic things as food and clothing. [Luke 12: 22-34]

What is more, he didn't consult with Pilate when he was planning to establish his kingdom of peace on earth. The truth of the matter is that he was leading in a different direction, and he understood that we needed to deal with fundamental issues like trust in God. Trusting God: that was the key to a ministry that was focused on revealing God as in every way gracious (inviting trust), a ministry focused on calling us to live the two-way street of God's love for us and our love for God (embodying trust), a ministry focused on creating a new community where these theories wouldn't just get tested but would become a new reality, what Paul calls *new creation*. He's the One foretold by the prophets. He's the One chosen by God. That's the message of Christmas. That's the story of the star, the song of the angels, the witness of the shepherds, our reason for worshipping still today. He's the One who shines as light in the darkness, exposing our misguided myths, illumining a way through the wilderness of this world to the peace God promises, to the peace our lives long for.

I must admit that whenever I think of peace, and that has been the case all week long, I can't help but hear the simple melody of a familiar hymn playing over and over in my mind. Perhaps you know the song I mean. "*Peace, Perfect Peace,*" can you hear it, "*in this dark world of sin? The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.*" It's such a beautiful melody, with such beautiful words: "*Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed? To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.*" All of the verses capture the many facets of this heartfelt hope. "*Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round? On Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.*" This was a hymn written by Edward Bickersteth back in 1877. He was inspired by Isaiah's vision of peace. We heard from Isaiah this evening [Isaiah 9:6-7]. Isaiah speaks of the Promised One, who "shall come forth as a shoot from the stump of Jesse. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him - the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." [Isaiah 11: 1-9] It was in this long-promised peaceable kingdom that the lion would come to lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid.

Bickersteth had just heard a sermon expounding on the vision for peace lifted up with Isaiah 26:3. Isaiah was talking about the key to learning how to lay hold of the peace God promises. "Thou didst keep him in perfect peace, the one whose mind is fixed on Thee, because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting Rock." That's where Bickersteth landed upon his memorable phrase, God's promise, our hope - peace, perfect peace. As it turned out, he was visiting a friend and relative who was close to death, and would die that very afternoon. He wrote down the lyrics and read them aloud just as they appear today, some one-hundred-thirty years later. "*Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours? Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.*" And again, "*Peace, perfect peace, our future still unknown? Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.*"

"*Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away? In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.*" These are great thoughts for Christmas Eve, with all the traveling that takes place. "*It is enough, earth's struggles soon shall cease. And Jesus calls us to Heaven's perfect peace.*" Peace: it is at the heart of God's hopes for the whole of creation. It is humanity's heartfelt longing. It is certainly our own desperate desire during the course of this hectic holiday season. It is all these things, to be sure; but do not underestimate how central the hope for peace is in the Biblical narrative, in Jesus' vision of the kingdom, throughout the history of the Church, and in the life of every believer. As I said earlier, Lutherans typically claim that grace is the key. Many say that love defines the essence of Christianity. But peace cannot and should not be overlooked as the overarching theme that captures the essence of God's hope, the promise of Jesus' kingdom, the evidence of the Spirit's presence among us, and our heartfelt longing for the heavenly future that awaits us.

Marilyn and I have a niece in the Washington, D.C. area, Marna, who is married to Jonathan. Marna is a graduate of the *Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs* in Minneapolis, and worked for the Clinton White House in the 1990's. Jonathan worked then and still works for the Department of Defense. So, they are Washington insiders, kind of. They have two young boys, Max and Elliot, who keep Marna quite busy now that Republicans control the White House. Anyway, Marna wrote her annual Christmas letter, and after the obligatory recounting of the on-going violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, she announced that she was going to start working for peace, beginning with small steps, on a small scale by teaching her boys not to make imaginary guns with every conceivable object they hold, like the uneaten portion of

his peanut butter sandwich that her youngest turned into a rat-a-tat gun aimed at his older brother!

It was a cute letter and a light-hearted moment, but not lacking in real significance. Small gestures mean a lot. They can change lives that can change someone's world. Homeless in Bethlehem, a baby in a manger: it didn't seem like much. But that baby became a man, whose ministry among us showed us the way of God's love, whose death on the cross unlocked the gates to eternal life, whose rebirth from the empty tomb created a community that has changed the world for good, and is changing our world and our lives still today. One solitary life, from an obscure village on the other side of the globe: and we have gathered to worship him, and more, to follow him with lives that are intent on extending the difference he has made for us, for the world, for all of creation.

**I'd like us to end with a prayer for peace. It, too, is a song, a song we've heard many times, although it may be new for us to sing. I'd like us to sing song #774 in the Blue Book, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, with the choirs lead helping us sing it through once in unison, and then a second time through in a round, with the pulpit side leading, and the lectern side following. It may not seem like much, but praying for peace is how we need to begin, and praying for peace here in the church is where we need to begin, because peace starts with the Prince of Peace, whose gospel of peace creates a people of peace, who will find peace only as we learn to live, as we pray... in Jesus' name.
Amen**