

“Prince of Peace”

Isaiah 9:2-7

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2020

Pastor Andy Kinsey

*“And they shall call him Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

- Isaiah 9:6

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, hear our prayers for peace in this world: remind us again that you are a God of peace, life, and truth. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Advent Message

Sometimes, as a staff, we get a little slaphappy with respect to all the things we need to do. It is all in fun, of course. Looking at the calendar, at the deadlines, we start to wonder if we are on the right track, or if we are making good decisions, and in our lighter moments, we begin to envision what we hope can happen.

One of our most favorite sayings, if not silly sentiments, is how we intend to envision “World peace” or, as we might say, “Whirled peas”! As someone who loves peas, I think it is funny, a bit tongue-in-cheek. At least, it is touch of humor, especially in a day when we seem to lack a sense of levity. “Envisioning whirled peas” or “Giving whirled peas a chance” – points to a lightness amidst the heaviness.

To be sure, I believe that our world can very much use a dose of peace at this moment, to go along with the new doses of the vaccine that we are beginning to see. We need to give actual peace, not world peas, a chance.

In other words, “Wanting world peace” or “Having peace in our time,” is not simply a cliché, on the mouths of Miss America or Neville Chamberlain before the outbreak of World War II. Rather, peace, peace in the biblical sense, really is something much deeper: peace truly is a yearning or a longing in our hearts; it is an actual way of life, a knowing of who God is and we are.

As Saint Augustine once wrote, peace is what we receive when our hearts find rest in God – not as a fantasy, but as a dose of reality, as a summons by God to receive peace as a gift, but also to practice peace as part of God’s kingdom-work, which always comes with risk, with vulnerability.

No More Fantasy!

I make this point because the closer we get to Christmas, the more I feel (and fear) that we are tempted to retreat into the “imagined worlds of our childhood,” and forget the cost, or the risk, *God* took to reconcile the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor. 5:7).

By this I mean that when Bing Crosby sings, “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like *the ones I used to know*,” we need to hear the operative words “used to know,” a suggestion that the dream of Christmas is behind us, in the past.¹

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with all the gifts we bring out from the past, to put them on our Christmas trees or around our homes. We do it all the time in our house, every year. We cannot avoid Christmas past.

But it comes with a word of caution: that there is a tendency, among us all, to sentimentalize Christmas – to sing of “happy golden days of yore” and forget some of the difficult truths of the season, as Pastor Jenothy shared with us during our Comfort and Joy Service the other night. This time of the year is not always peaceful for many.²

Indeed, it is why on this Fourth Sunday of Advent we might feel as if we want to skip Advent altogether and go straight to Christmas, to think of the Christmas we used to know!

The problem is that Advent refuses to dwell in a past that never was. Advent does not sing about the “golden days of yore.” Rather, Advent looks honestly into the present and anticipates a hopeful future. Advent is about the future. Advent is about preparing for the great coming of the kingdom of God in the Messiah Jesus, whom we call the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the One in whom God’s presence fully abides (Isaiah 9:6).³

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, Inc., 2018), 338.

² *Ibid.*, 337.

³ *Ibid.*, 338.

No More Illusions Either!

Again, there is no hiding behind some idealized past when we move through this special season of the year: Advent does not shy away from the truth of our condition as broken and sinful people. Instead, Advent faces our condition head on, and thereby offers us redemption!

In fact, the season of Advent reminds me of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Though the poem is about Christmas, it really speaks to the unsettling truth of Advent. In 1862, at the height of the Civil War, Longfellow was grieving the death his second wife. He had also gotten news about his own son's grave wounds in battle. At that moment, when he got the news, he sat down and wrote this poem. Perhaps you know it.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day,
their old carols play
And wild and sweet words repeat,
of peace on earth good will to all.
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 to all.

I wonder if Longfellow were living today, if he would write those words about our country now: for hate is strong and mocks the song, of peace on earth good will to all.⁴

Is there peace for all? Is there peace when we see violence on the streets, or when we hear of death-threats to election workers who are simply doing their jobs, or when we get reports about plans by militia groups to kidnap governors and mayors? Is there peace when we hear about threats to the peaceful transfer of power?

To be sure, when Ronald Reagan in 1980 spoke of “the miracle of the peaceful transfer of power,” he could not have imagined what is happening now – or maybe he could; he was certainly no sentimentalist, especially about matters pertaining to peace.

The Prophets Speak

⁴ Thanks to J. Howard Olds for this illustration in his sermon “War and the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah a 9:2-7) at www.esermons.com.

Sound unrealistic? What the Longfellows and Reagans of this world share is not too far off from what we hear in the Scriptures: on so many levels, the Bible reminds us that attaining peace does not mean that we retreat into “La La Land”!

As Christians, we are not to live in denial – *of anything*, whether it is about living in peace in our families, or between siblings or spouses, or between political parties, or among nations. Peace does not look past reality! *Rather, it faces reality.*

In fact, I can remember so well the class I had in seminary (at Emory University) when another president by the name of Jimmy Carter came and spoke to us about the risk of attaining peace between Egypt and Israel. There was nothing fanciful about it. It was messy, and it was costly.

In many ways, it speaks to what the prophet Jeremiah was saying to the people and leaders of Israel in the 8th century BC, when he warned them about *peace when there was no peace* (6:14).

Jeremiah was like a doctor delivering bad news to a patient. His diagnosis was that, unless the patient took measures to turn to God, the patient would die.

However, the false prophets of Jeremiah’s day gave a “second opinion.” They said, “Don’t listen to Jeremiah; what he is saying is not true; we are going to be just fine.” Jeremiah, however, said otherwise. He said:

“From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike, *all practice deceit.*
They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.
‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”

Translation: We cannot fake peace. We can only have peace when we recognize God’s presence, when we affirm the image of God in ourselves and in others, even our enemies, when we face the reality of our condition (Matthew 6:24).

Perhaps this is why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed *are* the “peacemakers.” Jesus knows that “peace-making” involves knowing the rocky road of human nature, the contradictions of the heart, and the deceptions of the mind (cf., Matthew 5:1-12). Blessed are *those* who want to get their hands dirty!

Maybe this is what the apostle Paul means in his Letter to the Philippians when he refers to “the peace that passes all understanding”: according to Paul, we really cannot understand peace, or *shalom*, until we practice peace, for until we

begin to practice peace, we really do not realize how difficult peace is to receive and achieve (cf., Philippians 4:7).

I also cannot help but think that this is why we find the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi so compelling: to be an instrument of peace means that we learn to place ourselves in situations the world deems so hopeless – that where there is hatred, where there is doubt, where there is suffering, where there is conflict – we make ourselves instruments of God’s peace. We learn to practice what we have received!

In his devotion on the *Names of the Messiah*, Walter Brueggemann writes that peace only begins to emerge when we *practice forgiveness*. It begins to occur when we are ready to *share generously*. Peace, both inwardly and outwardly, only starts to take place when we can *face our differences honestly and openly*, as well as when we *practice humility and vulnerability*.⁵

Again, as we celebrate Advent, we remember that there is a cost to following the Prince of Peace; there is risk. But there is also hope: there is hope in the One who will fulfill God’s promises – promises that remind us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13): like breaking out of old habits and patterns, or like focusing our attention on the One who make all things new, or like living in truth, no longer captive to what is false, but open to what is real: to God’s grace.

These are the blessings of Advent: we do not have to live in delusion or nostalgia; rather, we can live in peace, knowing that the Prince of Peace, and the Lord of Lords, is coming, and he is coming right soon. The blessings of Advent are real! Amen.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Names of the Messiah: An Advent Study* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2016), 64.