ADVENT #2 – GIVE BIRTH TO PEACE

(12/09/12)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2b, 6-7
Philippians 4:4-9

“As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’” (Luke 19:41-42)

What an interesting thought. In the many times that I have read that particular passage of scripture I never really caught what Jesus was saying. Jesus is telling us that our lives would be very different if we recognized “the things that make for peace.” Jesus is telling us that our world would be very different if we recognized “the things that make for peace.” Then he tells us, “But now they are hidden from your eyes.” Jesus had a real knack for stating the obvious!

In the quiet of our sanctuary, in the glow of the Advent candles, we are reminded of the traditional themes of Advent. Advent is about penitence, preparation, and expectancy. Advent is about hope, peace, joy, and love. Advent is about giving birth to the Christ child. This morning I would like us to reflect on the theme symbolized in the second of our Advent candles—the candle of peace. We need to light this candle within our hearts and within the world. We also need to nurture the tenuous flame of hope, the theme of our first Advent candle, as we both hope and work for peace -- peace on earth, peace within our families, and peace within ourselves.

Christmas is a time when we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace into the world. As we gather in worship this Christmas, we should be celebrating a victory, the reign of peace that was established through the Incarnation. When we look around us, however, we are forced to admit that no such victory has occurred. As individuals, as families, as a nation, and as a world, peace continues to elude us.

What are we doing wrong? Why is peace so elusive? The words which Jesus spoke as he gazed on the holy city of Jerusalem so many years ago seems especially apropos to us: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

In a Christmas hymn written at the close of World War I, the poet Laurence Housman, who was born during the Civil War, wrote:
Father eternal, Ruler of creation,
Spirit of life, which moved ere form was made,
Through the thick darkness covering every nation,
Light to man’s blindness, O be thou our aid:
Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done.

Races and peoples, lo, we stand divided,
And sharing not our griefs, no joy can share;
By wars and tumults love is mocked, derided,
His conquering cross no kingdom wills to bear:
Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done.

Envious of heart, blind-eyed, with tongues confounded,
Nation by nation still goes unforgiven;
In wrath and fear, by jealousies surrounded,
Building proud towers which shall not reach to heaven:
Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done.

How shall we love thee, holy hidden Being,
If we love not the world which thou has made?
O give us brother love for better seeing
Thy Word made flesh, and in a manger laid:
Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done.

I find myself thinking of my father this time of year. My father was a religious person who became a deeply spiritual person in the last years of his life as he was increasingly confined by arthritis to his room, his books, and his music. It was deeply moving to watch how beautiful his spirit became as he turned inward, as he talked with Jesus more and more honestly, openly, and often in his daily prayer.

In one of our last conversations about why peace seems so elusive, my dad said something I will never forget. He asked how we know that the Way to which Jesus called us, the way of peace wouldn’t work when, in the last two thousand years, we’ve never tried it.

I think this is the point. The Prince of Peace came into the world two thousand years ago to teach us how to live, to teach us how to live with each other, to teach us how to treat each other, but in the twenty centuries that have elapsed since his Advent we’ve never taken the risk of trying to live the way he lived and the way he taught us to live.
Just the other day David Crane mentioned a book that he highly recommends. The name of the book is *The Hole in the Gospel*. I won’t tell you the whole story, partially because it might spoil the story for you and partially because I haven’t read the book and *can’t* tell you the whole story, but if I understand it correctly it is essentially about a pastor who cut all the passages that contain the word “salvation” or are about being saved out of Jesus’ teachings. Surprisingly, there wasn’t that much cut out. What was left was a whole lot of teachings about how we should treat one another, how to live together in peace and love.

Perhaps in its concern about salvation, about holding the right set of beliefs so we will be saved, the Christian church lost sight of the more fundamental dimension of the Christian message, the transformation of our hearts through our relationship with the Christ who dwells within. If we got down on our knees and prayed every morning, if we asked Jesus to be present with us throughout the day, guiding our thoughts and feelings, guiding our speech and behavior, helping us live out each moment in accordance with his will, how could we be thoughtless or cold or selfish or cruel? If, before we did anything, we asked Jesus what he thought about it, if we tried to see the situation through his eyes, how could we go wrong?

If we as a nation asked how Jesus would want us to relate to other countries, to other religions, to other cultures, I wonder how it would shape our international diplomacy. If we asked Jesus how he would want us to respond to the tragedies of the world, I wonder how it would shape our mission outreach as individuals and as a church, and how it would shape the assistance that we give to the developing world. But we don’t do this. We are convinced this approach to international relations is naive and unrealistic. However, as my father pointed out, how do we know it wouldn’t work since we’ve never tried it?

We need Christ to come into our hearts this Christmas. We need Christ to guide and direct our thoughts, feelings, speech, and behavior. As Laurence Housman said, we need to pray for the light that will cure our blindness, the light that will dispel the thick darkness covering the nations and also covering us.

In ancient Israel, the prophets longed for the coming of the Prince of Peace. They longed for a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb, when all of God’s creation would live together in peace and harmony. They knew how elusive peace could be. They knew that left to our own devices, we humans would be at war more often than not. They knew we needed a
force, a power within us and within the world that would counter our warring tendencies, a Prince of Peace whose reign would last forever.

In this Christmas season we, too, long for the coming of Christ. We celebrate his Incarnation as a little baby, but we also long for his second coming. We, like Mary, are “expecting.” We are expecting, awaiting the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. As the German mystic Angelus Silesius has said: “Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he’s not born in thee thy soul is still forlorn.” As we saw last week, this is true of hope. It is also true of peace.

If we can build a home within our hearts for the second coming of Christ, we will give birth to the long-sought kingdom of God on earth and we will experience the “peace which passes all understanding” as individuals and as nations.

How can we sing carols to the Prince of Peace when we fail to wage peace, when we fail to counter the violence that poisons our world? Remember, we cannot separate the love of Christ from the love of our brothers and sisters as if they were two separate things. We know this because Jesus told us that inasmuch as we do it to one of the least of these, our brothers and sisters, we do it unto him. As Housman has said so eloquently,

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\begin{align*}
  How \text{ shall we love thee, holy, hidden Being, } \\
  If \text{ we love not the world which thou hast made? } \\
  O \text{ give us brother love for better seeing } \\
  Thy \text{ Word made flesh, and in a manger laid: } \\
  Thy \text{ kingdom come, O Lord, thy will be done. }
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We hope for peace, but the peace for which we long is slow in coming. We work for peace, but our working cannot always bring this goal to pass. We pray for peace, but our prayers often seem to disappear or dissolve into the great darkness. We do the best we can. Then we wait. If we wait in hope we do not wait passively, we watch with eager expectation.

Hardly a Sunday goes by without someone commenting on the number of people whose names appear in our prayer list. We are aware of their need, their pain, but as we pray for them we realize how many more are in need of prayer, people in our county and around the world who are struggling with physical illness, emotional problems, difficult situations, or carrying heavy burdens.
At times it feels overwhelming. We wonder if these people will be healed. We wonder if they will find peace. We wonder if our prayer will make a difference. We do what we can. Sometimes we can do something tangible like bake a casserole or make a call or visit. At all times we can pray. We pray that these people in special need may experience God’s presence and comfort in their time of trial, even and perhaps especially when a resolution is not immediately forthcoming.

Advent is a time of hoping, a time of waiting and watching. We wait and we watch for the presence of God in the midst of the difficulties of life. Every year, the Advent season reminds us not to flee the difficulties of life, but to work and pray, to wait and watch for the light of God to dispel the darkness of our lives.

Advent calls us to be faithful. It calls us to be faithful in our efforts to establish a reign of peace and justice on the earth. It also calls us to be hopeful, full of hope, when we have done all we can, when all we can do is pray. Advent calls us to remember God’s faithfulness to us, to remember that God does not forsake us in our time of distress, but is Emmanuel—God with us.

In this Advent season, let us faithfully hope, work, and pray for peace. But let us do this not only as an outward act but also as a deep inward silence. Let us remember that peace begins with us. If we can open our hearts that peace might be born again and again in us, then we, like Mary, will be able to give birth to peace in the world.

In this Advent season, let us pray that the Christ child will bring peace to our world, our nation, our communities, our families, and to us as individuals. I pray that we will all experience this deep inner peace in this Advent season.

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A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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