

## ADVENT 2 -- PEACE

(12/10/17)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3  
Mark 4:35-41; 5:25-34

*“Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (1 Cor 1:3)

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Last week we lit the first of our Advent candles, the candle that symbolizes hope. Hope keeps us moving forward during those difficult times when we long for a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel.

We should be cautious, however, concerning the role hope plays in our lives. By focusing on the future, even if we look forward to it with anticipation, we pull our focus out of the present. We do not want to become so focused on the future that we believe life will become happy, meaningful, or joyous only when a certain set of conditions come to pass. The message of the Gospel is that life is meaningful and joyous *right now* if we open our eyes to see it, if we open our hearts to receive it.

This morning we lit the second of our Advent candles, the candle of peace. One of the spiritual gifts of Christmas is peace. The Christ who was born in a manger was hailed as the “Prince of Peace.” We witness to the importance of peace when we extend the greeting of peace to those around us in our Sunday worship. Whether we say, “The peace of God be with you” or just “I wish you good morning,” we are wishing our neighbors the experience of *shalom*.

What is this peace for which we long? Webster gives us five basic meanings of peace. Peace is (1) the normal, non-warring condition of a nation, group of nations, or the world; (2) a state of mutual harmony between people or groups, especially in personal relations; (3) cessation of or freedom of the mind from annoyance, distraction, anxiety etc.; (4) a state of tranquility or serenity; and (5) silence; stillness. These dimensions of peace are congruent with the way the word is used in the Bible. They speak to our longing as individuals, as a church, and as a world in this Advent season.

The Old Testament usage illustrates Webster’s first definition of peace: the non-warring condition of a nation or group of nations, and also the second: a state of mutual harmony between people or groups. However, the term is applied exclusively to the

nation of Israel and more specifically to the city of Jerusalem. It is not extended to the rest of the world. Psalm 122, a song of praise and prayer for Jerusalem, says,

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
May they prosper who love you.*

The peace for which the psalmist longs is the end of conflict and the opportunity to once again worship in the temple.

The prophet Isaiah speaks eloquently of peace. Isaiah 54, which is referred to as “The Eternal Covenant of Peace,” describes peace as the resolution of our conflict with God. It identifies God as the one who has brings conflict, strife, and punishment to his people. God says,

*For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you.  
This is like the days of Noah to me:  
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
would never again go over the earth,  
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
and will not rebuke you.  
For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed.*

This passage implies that God can be angry with his people, rebuke them, hide his face from them and abandon them. This isn't the message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Many of these Old Testament passages also imply that God will destroy all the enemies of the Hebrews, that God loves Israel alone. I know this is what the Hebrews believed in those times, and what many religious people still believe in relation to their faith group, but the God who utters these words is a tribal warrior god, not the God who was revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition to the understanding of peace as an absence of external war, the Old Testament word “shalom” describes a psychological or spiritual state. The root meaning of shalom ties it to wholeness or wellbeing. It was used in religious and secular contexts as a greeting and a farewell. This comes closest to Webster's third meaning: freedom of

the mind from annoyance, distraction, and anxiety; and the fourth meaning: a state of tranquility or serenity. This speaks to our desire to find inner peace.

If peace on earth is elusive (which it obviously is!), inner peace is even more elusive. Many people in our time are tormented by anxiety and depression. The majority do not receive either psychological or spiritual treatment; they either struggle with or medicate away the symptoms. They fail to experience that inner peace that is described by Webster as a state of tranquility or serenity. If you have true inner peace, you will be at peace no matter what is happening or not happening in your external life. As the apostle Paul said, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content."

As with hope, we need to raise a caution concerning peace. True inner peace is not built on the absence of conflict. It is not a passive state of homeostasis where nothing grows, where nothing evolves. Peace is not an absence of strife. Jesus says,

*Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth;  
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (Mt. 10:34)*

Peace is not the beginning of the process but the end, an end that becomes an integral part of many new beginnings.

Jesus seems to regard peace as a power that we either possess or do not possess. He commissions his disciples to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. He tells them,

*Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.  
(Mt. 10:13)*

So our peace is a power, a presence, or an energy force that we can give, we can withhold, or we can even retract. I picture a spiritual energy that flows out from us to a person in need of healing. This is one way of understanding what happens in intercessory prayer.

We could try this in the coming week. When we are talking with someone or listening to someone, especially if that person is anxious or upset, we could try to visualize an energy field of peace flowing out from our heart like a blessing into the person. To do this I suspect we would have to be physically and emotionally present to

the person. I also suspect that a prerequisite for bestowing our peace on others is that we actually feel, experience, and incarnate this inner power of peace within ourselves.

If we have true inner peace, we will be able to work miracles. Our scripture lesson this morning was the account of Jesus stilling the storm. Jesus is crossing the sea with his disciples. When he falls asleep, a storm suddenly arises. His disciples, in fear, wake him, concerned that they will perish.

*Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. (Mark 4:39)*

We may not be able to still a storm at sea, but that is not important. It is more important that we still the storms within ourselves. If we can awaken Jesus within us, we may be able to bring enough peace to our anxious and troubled lives to still the storms that rage within us and in our relationships.

Jesus takes this understanding of peace a little further. He connects it with the experience of healing. The second of our gospel lessons is the account of the woman who is healed by touching Jesus' cloak. When she touches him, Jesus realizes that "power had gone forth from him." Perhaps this was his peace. He finds the woman who confesses that it was she who touched his garment. Jesus says to her,

*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease. (Mark 5:34)*

When we turn to Jesus in humility and faith, when we turn to him for healing, his power passes into us. The healing power of Jesus can bring us the peace that leads to healing. This implies that the absence of peace, the absence of that state of inner harmony or serenity, those spiritual fruits that grow from a life of faith, may be a cause or at least a contributing factor to our distress. If we "go in peace," we and also other people may be healed of our dis-ease.

In his pastoral letters Paul tells us that peace is a gift from God. In many of his letters, he begins with a blessing of peace. He begins his first letter to the Corinthians:

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul tells us that peace, like love, is a characteristic of God. It is a part of God's nature. He tells us that God bestows it upon us. As in the case of love, all we have to do is open our hearts and our minds to receive it.

How can we find this peace, the “peace that passes all understanding?” I believe the clue to this is symbolized in our Advent candle. Peace is not a gift or blessing that stands alone. It is inextricably tied to hope, joy, and love. As symbolized in the Advent candle, Christ is in the center of all these gifts, all these inner blessings.

Christ would bestow the blessing of peace upon us. If we let him into our hearts, just as Mary and Joseph did so many years ago, he can grant us the gift of peace. As Jesus told his disciples prior to his departure:

*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 let them be afraid.*

*(Jn. 14:27)*

May the fifth meaning of Webster’s definitions of peace: the gift of inner silence, stillness, and serenity rest upon us in this Advent season, in our celebration and experience of Christmas, and throughout the year to come.

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