

## ADVENT 2 – THE INCARNATION OF PEACE

(12/08/19)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7  
Philippians 4:4-9  
Luke 19:28-42

*“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!

This struck me in particular this past week as I was reading the Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron’s most recent book: *Welcoming the Unwelcome*. A central theme of the book is helping us overcome our tendency to create the kind of polarized society, the kind of polarized nation, the kind of polarized world that leads to conflict, that closes both our minds and our hearts to our brothers and sisters. I am thinking that this might be a good next book for our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group, combining, as it does, basic themes of Christian spirituality, Tibetan Buddhist spirituality, and Jungian psychology—particularly the importance of the integration of the shadow.

In the quiet of our sanctuary, which is so beautifully decorated this year, in the soft glow of the Advent candles, we are reminded of the traditional themes of Advent. The liturgical color for this season is either purple or a deep blue. As I Bob L’Heureux recently informed me, many churches are switching from the traditional purple to blue because Advent is less about penitence, which is a central theme of the season of Lent and which is symbolized by the color purple, than it is about preparation and expectancy.

I think this is an excellent point. Advent is really about hope, peace, joy, and love, not repentance. (Unless, of course, you’re a child making a last-ditch effort to cash in on Christmas morning, to avoid that dreaded lump of coal.) Advent is about giving birth to the Christ child, making a place in our hearts for this spiritual presence. This morning I would like us to reflect on the theme symbolized in the second of our Advent candles—the candle of peace.

The central theme of Christmas is the incarnation. When a spiritual reality is incarnated, it takes flesh; it enters the world of space and time. We need to incarnate the spiritual gift of peace; we need to bring it into the world of space and time, into our daily lives and into the fabric of our society. We need to make it part of our flesh and bone daily life, our very being. Symbolically speaking, we need to light the candle of peace within our hearts. We need to light the candle of peace within our nation. We need to light the candle of peace within the world. Of course, we also need to light, to nurture the tenuous flame of hope, the theme of our first Advent candle, which we lit last week, as we hope, we long, and we work for peace.

Our Sunday bulletin this morning reminds us that Christmas is a time when we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace into the world. As we gather in worship this Advent season, we should be celebrating a victory, the reign of peace that was established throughout the world through the Incarnation, the birth of the Christ child. 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 that 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."

Once again, I wish Jesus had been a little more specific. In our Sunday morning Bible study, we have noted how the book of Genesis devoted ten chapters to the story of Joseph in Egypt. If only the gospel writers had seen fit to include just a little more of what Jesus was thinking on the subject of peace and how we might incarnate this spiritual reality, how we might bring it to birth in our time!

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 hast 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.*

The words of this hymn were written approximately 100 years ago. It is both striking and sad that Laurence Housman's description of the world of his time, is as true of our world and our time as it was of his. Despite the tremendous technological advances of the past century, have we really made no progress in the spiritual realm? Are we closer to creating the kingdom of God on earth—or farther away?

I find myself thinking of my father this time of year. My father was a religious person for most of his adult life, certainly after he met and married my mother, which changed his life for the better. However, my father 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.

Several years ago, I read an interesting book. The name of the book is *The Hole in the Gospel*. The book is about a pastor who cut all the passages that contain the words “salvation” or “being saved” out of Jesus’ teachings. Surprisingly, very little was extracted. What was left was a lot of teachings about the importance of giving, the importance of loving, and how we should live together in peace.

Maybe salvation isn’t the point. Maybe the teachings of Jesus are not about being saved rather than being damned. Maybe being or becoming a Christian is not a matter of holding the right set of beliefs. As the church went down this path over the past two thousand years, I believe it lost sight of the deeper 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, 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 or the other person, the person whom we find annoying through *his* eyes, how could we go wrong? As Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa said in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after the birth of Jesus, “Be a Christian, and then do whatever you want.”

If we as a nation asked how Jesus would want us to relate to other countries, both “friend” and “foe,” to other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, to other cultures and ethnic groups, I wonder how it would shape our international diplomacy, our relationship with the rest of the world. If we asked Jesus how he would want us to respond to the tragedies of the world, the hundreds of millions of people who have become refugees, who have been driven from their homeland by war or natural disasters, I wonder how it would shape our mission outreach, 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 our thoughts, feelings, and behavior as individuals, as a nation and as a world. 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.

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 creatures 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 to mobilize a force, an energy field, a power within us and within the world that would counter our warring tendencies. They believed that the reign of this Prince of Peace 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 await the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. However, as 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." Last week we saw that 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 that passes all understanding."

How can we sing carols to the Prince of Peace when we fail to wage peace, when we fail to counter the violence, the racism, the misogyny, the homophobia, the Islamophobia, the anti-Semitism that poisons our nation and 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 our brothers and sisters, we do it unto him. As Housman has said so eloquently,

*How shall we love thee, holy, hidden Being,  
If we love not the world which thou hast 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.*

We hope, we long for peace, but that peace is slow in coming. We work for peace, but at times we suspect our efforts are in vain. We pray for peace, but at times we fear that our prayers simply 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.

Every Sunday we note 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 who are carrying heavy burdens.

At times it feels overwhelming. We wonder if these people will be healed. We wonder if they will find a sense of inner 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 one of our shut-ins. 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 or a physical healing 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.

In this Advent season, let us faithfully hope, work, and pray for peace. 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.

Thy kingdom come, O Lord; Thy will be done.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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