

ADVENT 2 -- GIVE BIRTH TO PEACE

(12/8/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2b, 6-7
Philippians 4:4-9
Luke 19:28-42
Matthew 5:9

“If you hope to give birth to God on earth, remember--conception takes place in the heart, the womb of the Eternal.” (Angelus Silesius)

“Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he’s not born in thee thy soul is still forlorn.” (Angelus Silesius).

“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)

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Today, Emma and Cathy lit the second candle in our Advent wreath—the candle of peace. The four candles, the four themes of Advent are all important, but this year, I think we could make a case that peace is the most important of them all. However, when I start to think about it, without hope and love we would not be able to experience peace and the joy that comes from peace. I guess they are all important; they certainly are a central part of Jesus’ life and his teachings!

The things that make for peace. Not coincidentally, that phrase, that challenge is at the heart of our gospel reading this morning. 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.” Jesus is telling us that we, that each of us as individuals would be very different if we recognized “the things that make for peace.”

Then he tells us, somewhat cryptically, “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 soft glow of the Advent candles, we are reminded of the traditional themes of Advent. To be sure, Advent is about penitence, preparation, and expectancy. But Advent is also about hope, peace, joy, love, and light. Advent is about not only celebrating the birth of the Christ child; it is about giving birth to the Christ child once again in our lives and in the world.

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! Of course, 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.

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 of the Christ, the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth. 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 the peace for which we long 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.”

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.*

Now here's the kicker—the final verse:

*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.*

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 relate to 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 literally cut all the passages that contain the words "salvation" or "being saved" out of the gospels, out of Jesus' teachings. Surprisingly, there wasn't that much cut out! 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.

I suspect the same would be true if we cut out all the passages where Jesus condemns people who self-designate as LGBTQ; I think we would be left with a lot of teachings about the importance of loving and how we can have compassion for and love someone who is different from us, someone who, like us, is an incarnation of God. I suspect the same would true if we cut out all the passages where Jesus condemns those who follow other religious or spiritual paths; there wouldn't be many holes in the gospels. We would just be left with a lot of teachings about how we are all God's children and how we should not only tolerate each other, we should respect each other and learn from each other.

As we have discussed in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group this year in our reflection on the book we have been reading and discussing--Peter Stilla's *Naturally Miraculous*, in its concern about holding the right set of beliefs so its followers, the members of the one true church will be saved, the church lost sight of the deeper Christian message: the transformation of our hearts through a mystical or numinous experience--our relationship with the Christ who dwells within.

I think of the bumper sticker I saw many years ago; it said, "Christianity—it's not a religion, it's a relationship. 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 through his eyes, how could we go wrong?

If we as either Republicans or Democrats asked how Jesus would want us to relate to our brothers and sisters who hold a different political viewpoint than we, I wonder how it would help to heal the polarization that is rending asunder the fabric of our nation.

If we as a nation asked how Jesus would want us to relate to other countries, to other cultures, I wonder how it would shape our international diplomacy, how it would shape our relationship with Cuba, our response to the ongoing tragedy in the Middle East, and our response to refugees who are seeking sanctuary and a new life in our country.

If we asked Jesus how he would want us to respond to the tragedies of the world, like the famine that has been caused by a civil war in Sudan and the chaos that is continuing in Haiti, 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 that 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 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, 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 are awaiting 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, the first Sunday in Advent, 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 transphobia, the Islamophobia 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. We know this because Jesus told us that the peacemakers, those that pray and work for peace are the children of God. 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 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 dissolve into the great darkness. We do the best we can. Then we wait. However, if we wait in hope, if we wait in what a deeply spiritual woman called “deep hope” in a conversation we had this past week, 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 people stand 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 peace. We wonder if our prayer will make a difference. We do what we can. Sometimes we can do something tangible like bring something to stock the shelves of the Southborough Food Pantry, or bake a casserole for someone who is going through a difficult time, or make a call or visit to someone who is shut in. 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. And our prayer, if it is a prayer of the heart, brings the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love alive within us!

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 move toward them, to move into them, for in doing this, we transform them. Advent reminds us 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 be peacemakers. 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. Let us bring this longing for and commitment to the hard work of peace into the smallest, the darkest places within us as well, those parts of us that need to be touched by the birth of the Christ child this Christmas.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
December 8, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will (hopefully) be posted on our church website later this week.