

ADVENT 2 – INCARNATE PEACE!

(12/04/2022)

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)

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. In our Advent worship we prepare ourselves for not only the celebration but also the experience of Christmas. Advent helps us to prepare for the birth, the incarnation of the Christ child in our lives and then, through us, to give birth to his message, his presence in the world.

Prior to the recent midterm elections, public opinion polls attempted to discern how people might vote based on which issues or concerns they considered paramount. In these polls, potential voters ranked the relative importance of issues like climate change/transitioning to green energy, the economy/inflation, abortion/women’s reproductive rights, immigration/border control, gun control/Second Amendment rights, the national debt, states’ rights, reducing crime/making our streets and our cities safe, forgiveness of student loans, and support for Ukraine in its resistance to the Russian invasion.

Of course, people had other concerns. Here in New England, we are concerned that Bill Belichick’s faith in Mac Jones as our franchise quarterback and his faith in Matt Patricia and Joe Judge as the offensive wizards he believes them to be are misplaced. But that’s not the point.

Following this past Thursday night’s disastrous game with the Buffalo Bills, a game that Darlene and I watched in its entirety, I thought, “There goes three hours of my life, three hours totally wasted, three hours that I will never have again!” But again, that’s not the point.

I would like to add another concern to this list. It’s a concern that may underlay, and thus make help us to solve all the others. I think we need to learn how to live together. We need to learn how to live together in true community, a local, national, and global community that is grounded in acceptance, in care, in compassion, and in love. We need to learn how to live together in a diverse community, a community that not only accepts and tolerates the broad spectrum of diversity in our brothers and sisters, but which values and celebrates the richness of that diversity.

How can we do this? In this Advent season, I would suggest that we could take a big step forward in creating a world characterized by both justice and peace if we could incarnate hope,

peace, joy, and love, the four themes of our Advent candles. Remember, change, even big change, even global change, begins with us.

Let me read once again an excerpt from the gospel of Luke, the passage of scripture we heard this morning.

As Jesus came near and saw the city [the holy city of Jerusalem], 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."

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 certainly had a knack for stating the obvious!

I recalled Jesus' teachings about peace this past week as I re-read the Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron's book: *Welcoming the Unwelcome*. The book is an attempt to help us to overcome our more than marginal propensity 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. This might be a good book for our Spiritual Study and Growth Group when we resume meeting, combining, as it does, basic themes of Christian spirituality, Tibetan Buddhist spirituality, and Jungian psychology-particularly the importance of the integration as opposed to the projection of the shadow.

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 understand it, some churches are changing 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 purple, than it is about preparation and expectancy. I think this is a valid point. However, I like the purple paraments that adorn our pulpit and lectern, and I like my purple stole. Maybe we can make the change to blue when our present paraments and my stole wear out. We don't rush into change in this church.

Advent is about hope, peace, joy, and love; it is not about repentance. (Unless, of course, you're a child making a last-ditch effort to cash in on Christmas morning, to pull your act together in the hope that a pre-Christian repentance will help you avoid receiving that dreaded lump of coal.) Advent is about longing; it is about expectancy; it is about giving birth to the Christ child, making a place in our hearts for this spiritual presence. When we do this, either individually or collectively, we experience the peace that passes all understanding.

The central theme of Christmas is the incarnation. When a spiritual reality, an eternal reality, a transcendent 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. We need to bring it 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, to sustain us as we hope, we long, and we work for peace.

In the lighting of the Advent candle this morning, Alan and Rick reminded 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.” And then Jesus wept. He wept at the pain that we inflict upon ourselves and each other.

I do wish that the writers of the gospels had told us more of what Jesus said about peace, about “the things that make for peace.” The book of Genesis devotes 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 or teaching, about how we might incarnate the spiritual gift of peace, how we might give birth to it in our lives, 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. Don't you find it 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 are we further away?

And don't worry—I'm not going to have us sing "Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation" as our closing hymn this morning. I know that several of you would line up to tell me after the worship service that we should only sing happy, upbeat hymns or carols during Advent!

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, a relationship that 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, 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 excised! What was left was just a lot of teachings about the importance of deepening our relationship with God, the importance of giving, the importance of loving, the importance of self-reflection, of owning our own sin, the importance of accepting other people, even people who are different from us, and how we should live together in peace.

Maybe salvation isn’t the point of the Christian faith, the Christian religion. Maybe the teachings of Jesus are not about being saved rather than being damned, of going to heaven rather than hell after we die. Maybe being a Christian or becoming a Christian is not a matter of holding the right set of beliefs, of swearing fealty to an orthodox belief system. As the church went down this sin and salvation 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? In the words of Augustine, the North African bishop who lived in the 4th century after 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,” how he would want us to relate to other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam—and also atheism, how he would want us to relate to other cultures, other religions, other races, other ethnic groups, other gender identities or sexual orientations, I wonder how it would shape not only our nation but also our international diplomacy, our relationship with the rest of the world. If we asked Jesus how he would want us to respond to 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, speech, 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 historical incarnation as a little baby, but we also long for his second coming. We, like Mary, are "expecting." We open our hearts to receive his gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. 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.

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 in as much 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. However, if we wait in hope, we do not wait passively; we watch with eager expectation.

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 inner mindfulness, a deep inner silence. Let us remember that peace begins with us. If we can open our hearts to the birth of peace, if we can become the womb of Christ, then we, like Mary, will be able to give birth to peace in the world—or at least in our little corner of it.

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.

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