

## *Peace*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 9:6** For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

**James 3:17-1 NRS** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

<sup>NRS</sup> **John 14:27** 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.

## *Peace*

There's no doubt that we're in the Christmas season. The church calendar year declares this is the second Sunday in Advent. The ads in the paper, on TV, and in our email tell us that it's time to do our Christmas decorating, gift buying, and partying. And we're beginning to get Christmas cards in the mail. Some of them will show a bright star or gleaming angels against a deep blue sky and proclaim a message on the subject of peace. Our bulletin cover shows the theme for the second Sunday in Advent as "peace." "Why do we think about peace during the season of Christmas?"

Those who love Handel's *Messiah* may hear a mighty chorus in their head singing the text from Isaiah, "wonderful, counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!" We usually fail to notice that Isaiah was writing about a past event –he says, "a child **has been born**, not will be born. Nonetheless, it's appropriate to understand much of this as also applying to Jesus, especially the title, Prince of Peace. After all, Luke says that angels delivered the birth announcement with the message, **Luke 2:14** "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all."

This is why our carols and hymns have many references to peace: "Peace on earth, and mercy mild,"<sup>1</sup> "praises sing to God the King, And peace to all on earth."<sup>2</sup>

Many people have difficulty thinking about peace at Christmas. What peace, they wonder? War is certainly the opposite of peace, and we've been at war for ten years now. Today's wars follow closely on the heels of others: the Gulf War, Vietnam, Korea, World War II. It seems like we're never very long without war. People become jaded and discouraged. The Prince of Peace has arrived? Angels sang about the arrival of peace on earth? It certainly doesn't look like peace arrived – or stuck around. What peace?

When we think of peace as the absence of war, we've crushed and flattened the concept of peace. When we read about peace in the Old Testament, we're dealing with the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is a rich, thick word, a word heavy with meaning. It's about peace, quiet, tranquility, contentment. It's about completeness, safety, soundness in body, welfare, health, prosperity, and friendship. Shalom is healing, wholeness, unity, and harmony. And shalom is intertwined and tangled up with righteousness and justice. Isaiah 32:17 says, "The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." Righteousness, right living, produces the results of peace, quietness, and trust. Later, in chapter 59, Isaiah says that the opposite is also true, "<sup>8</sup>The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.<sup>9</sup> Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us." (Isa 59:8-9 NRS) If you want peace, Isaiah says, righteousness and justice are necessary conditions. In Old Testament usage, shalom is about your inner condition, and your relationship with others around you, and your relationship with God. To think of shalom only as peace in terms of the absence of war is to put peace in a tiny box that was never intended.

What's the concept of peace in the New Testament? It's much the same. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes about the breadth of what is meant by peace, listing attributes that are intertwined such as love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Peace is demonstrated by calmness, simplicity, courtesy, and forgiveness. So, just like in the Old Testament, the concept of peace in the New Testament includes a general state of well-being, harmony, and our relationships with others and with God. The story of Jesus begins with angels singing "Peace on earth, goodwill toward all." Near the end of the story of Jesus, as he was having supper with his disciples on the night that he was arrested, Jesus said, "Peace I leave

with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”(John 14:27) The very idea of peace brackets the life of Jesus. And when Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he told them that the peace of God surpassed our ability to understand and that peace would protect our hearts and minds.

Understanding the breadth and depth of peace in the scriptures, the peace of God, peace that is beyond our ability to fully encompass, raises an even bigger question. Where is it? I’m a Christian. I believe in Jesus. I show up for worship most Sundays. Where is this all-embracing peace? We sing that “love came down at Christmas.” But it seems like the divine postal service lost the peace package before it got here. Not only do we seem to always be preparing for war, fighting a war, or suffering the results of the war recently ended – but all of those wonderful attributes of the broader understanding of God’s peace – well-being, contentment, harmony, and such-like – well, they seem to be in real short supply, too. Where’s the peace?

Do we expect peace to be a holy inoculation that’s given in the waters of baptism? Or, do we expect peace to be unwrapped with the first change of the swaddling cloth that held the holy child? God’s peace isn’t a peace bomb, dropped on us like the holy opposite of germ warfare, infecting us with contentment and tranquility. Remember how Jesus said, “My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” Jesus didn’t give in the same way that the world gives gifts. Jesus gave freely. He gave to those who didn’t deserve. And he gave the example of his life. He gave us The Way. Peace isn’t an air freshener; it’s a task, a program, a path.

Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are the peace lovers.” He said, “Blessed are the peace makers.” In the letter to the Ephesians (6:15), we’re told to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are to declare the good news. We’re to live and teach peace. In Hebrews 12:14 we’re exhorted to “Pursue peace with everyone.” Pursue peace! Chase after it. Wage peace. Wage peace with your family. Wage peace with your neighbor! In waging peace, use the tools of calmness, quietness, harmony, righteousness, patience, generosity, and all of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit. Be the peace we declare. Be the change that we seek.

We have received mercy and love, which give us hope. Because we are citizens of God's kingdom, our purpose is to show and share that mercy and grace to others. That’s how we proclaim the gospel of peace. Peace isn’t the absence of conflict, but the presence of God’s love – and we are to be that presence.

God’s peace, the peace that Jesus lived, is so broad. It involves all of our life. It’s intertwined with righteousness and justice. It includes generosity, patience, self-control, and kindness. The opposite of scriptural peace is poverty, depression, suffering, hatred, prejudice, oppression, anxiety, selfishness, self-centeredness, dominion, and control. And these drive out peace in our hearts, in our relationships with others, and our relationship with God.

Brothers and sisters, be a peace maker. Use the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the tools of righteousness, love, and justice to declare the gospel of peace. Having received God’s mercy and grace, give mercy and grace to everyone you meet. The peace in your life and around your life will be beyond comprehension!

## ***PEACE ON EARTH***

"Peace on earth, goodwill to all" . . .

The song came out like one loud hosanna  
hurled through the earth's darkness,  
lighting the Bethlehem sky.

Sometimes I hear it now,  
but it means a baby in a manger;  
it means a time of year,  
a cozy feeling,  
a few coins in the Salvation Army bucket.

It doesn't mean much –  
and then it's gone,  
lost in the tinsel.

Where did the angel's song go?  
Who hushed the alleluias?

Was it death and war and disease and poverty?  
Was it darkness and chaos and famine and plague?  
Who brought the violence and took away the sweet plucking  
of heavenly harps?  
Who brought the despair and took away hope?  
Who brought barrenness and crushed the flowers?  
Who stole the music and brought the silence?  
What Herods lurk within our world seeking  
to kill our children?

Are there still those  
who listen for the brush of angel wings  
and look for stars above some godforsaken little stable?

Are there still those  
who long to hear an angel's song  
and touch a star?  
To kneel beside some other shepherd  
in the hope of catching a glimpse of eternity  
in a baby's smile?

Are there still those who sing  
"Peace on earth, goodwill to all"?  
If there are – then, O Lord,  
keep ablaze their flickering candle  
in the darkness of this world!

Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

Let us pray together –  
**Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;**  
**Where there is hatred, let me sow love;**  
**Where there is injury, pardon;**  
**Where there is doubt, faith;**  
**Where there is despair, hope;**  
**Where there is darkness, light;**  
**And where there is sadness, joy. Amen**

(St. Francis of Assisi)

**Psalm 4:8 NRS** I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.  
**Isaiah 54:10 NRS** 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, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.  
**2 Corinthians 1:2 NRS** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
**Galatians 5:22-23 NRS** By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.  
**Romans 5:1 NRS** Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
**Philippians 4:4-7 NRS** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**Hebrews 12:14 NRS** Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

**Ephesians 6:15 NRS** As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. In Jewish culture, and in Muslim culture as well, the standard greeting isn't "Hello" but "Peace." And the standard response isn't "Hello," but "And peace to you." In fact, "Peace" is both a word of greeting and farewell. Paul begins many of his letters with the greeting, "Grace and peace to you." When you greet someone with "Shalom!"—when you really wish someone peace — you're saying a mouth full!

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<sup>1</sup> Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, PH # 31

<sup>2</sup> O Little Town of Bethlehem, PH # 44