

## *Peace*

**Isaiah 2:3-4** Many nations will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the LORD's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God's paths." Instruction will come from Zion; the LORD's word from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war.

**Isaiah 11:6-9** The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox. <sup>8</sup> A nursing child will play over the snake's hole; toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den. <sup>9</sup> They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, just as the water covers the sea.

**Romans 15:5-10** May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. <sup>6</sup> That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice. <sup>7</sup> So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. <sup>8</sup> I'm saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, <sup>9</sup> and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, Because of this I will confess you among the Gentiles, and I will sing praises to your name. <sup>10</sup> And again, it says, Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people.

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Every winter I get this longing to wake up to find 6-8 inches of snow on the ground. A fresh snow is so quiet and peaceful. It seems like there's a special kind of silence when everything is covered with a fresh blanket of snow. My vision of a perfectly peaceful day also involves a fire in the fireplace, a mug of hot tea or cider, and a good book. All of us probably have some ideal vision of what peace would be for us. And this time of year we get cards with wishes for us to have peace and joy. We remember that Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. (John 14:27 CEB)," and we think, "O, yes, Lord, I could use some peace in my life."

One of the Saturday night movies that we showed was *Chariots of Fire*. One of the main characters was Eric Liddell, a young Scotsman who competed in the Olympics during the years right after World War I. After winning a gold medal, he went to China as a missionary. Eric Liddell once said, "You will know as much of God, and only as much of God, as you are willing to put into practice." He was right, of course. If you want to know the peace of God, you have to put it into practice.

As Cathy and I read one of this week's Advent devotionals, I was struck by how Joseph put God's peace into practice. In Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus it says, "When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly." (Matthew 1:18-19 CEB) Men, I'd like for you to try to imagine how you would feel in this sort of situation. You're engaged. You are looking forward to being married and spending your life with a woman in a loving relationship and raising a family. You have dreams for the future. Then you find out that this young woman is pregnant – and you know that you aren't the cause. What would you feel? Are you angry? Are your dreams shattered? Is your ego crushed? Would you feel like you'd been kicked in the chest? How does this make you feel about yourself? About her? Whatever you feel, it certainly isn't peace, I bet. But Joseph isn't a typical man. Matthew says that he was righteous. Righteous. Not self-righteous. Many of us would have denounced Mary for betraying

us. We would have declared loudly how we had been wronged – how noble we were and what a depraved and deceitful person she was. We would have been self-righteous.

Matthew doesn't tell us how Joseph felt about himself, but we are told that he put Mary's situation above his own. He didn't want to humiliate her and he was going to call off the engagement quietly. He chose a course of action that was far more considerate of Mary than it was of himself. In this terrible situation, Joseph was peaceful. He knew the peace of God because he put the peace of God into practice. He knew as much of God as he was willing to put into practice. And he made these decisions before the angel appeared to him.

Peace is a word that gets used a lot during the Christmas season. We sing *Silent Night* and it has a calming and peaceful affect. We might sing, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." We really would like to have more peace in our life. And often we just think about having more personal peace. But when you sing, "Let it begin with me," don't let it end with you. The peace of Christmas isn't just about personal inner peace.

We find many passages in Isaiah that speak to us of who Jesus was and what he did. In the second chapter we heard about how "they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war." In chapter eleven we read that, "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat," and "They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD." And there is glorious music that almost shouts the words from the ninth chapter of Isaiah, "A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." (Isa 9:6 CEB) These aren't declarations about inner personal peace. The peace of God is concerned with communities, with cities, with nations.

The angels that appeared to the shepherds on the hillsides around Nazareth proclaimed "joyous news for all people." They sang of glory to God and peace on earth." (Luke 2:10-14) The peace of God, the peace of Christmas, is not just our personal possession. God cares about whole countries and about war. How are we doing? The record of countries that claim to be Christian nations is spotty. During the 1500s, much of Europe wallowed in a brutal war of Christian nations at war with other Christian nations and the death toll was astounding. In fact, wars involving self-declared Christian nations have taken place in every century.

It has been said that, "To deny anyone their human rights is to deny their humanity." (Nelson Mandela) Always, in every war, the enemy is described as less than human in some way. That is a far greater offense than we might think. It denies that they are human. It denies that they are made in the image of God. It denies the goodness of God's handiwork. It is theological rebellion against God. It is sin, not only against fellow humans; it is sin against God.

But there have been times when war has been avoided. Faced with the economic and human rights oppression of the British Empire, Gandhi used Christian principles to shame a Christian Empire into peacefully returning independence to India.

Our own nation's sinful oppression of civil rights could have spiraled down into another civil war in the 1960s. But the Christian leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King inspired people to seek a better way and a better future.

And just this week, we have been reminded again of another person who sought peace rather than war. Nelson Mandela was born into tribal aristocracy. He could have enjoyed the inherited authority and power, but he chose a life of service in support of the value of all persons. At one point, his trust in the effectiveness of non-violence wavered and his organization took up armed resistance. He spent 27 years in prison, 18 years breaking rocks in the hot sun. He was serving a life sentence. He

was unable to go to his son's funeral. He missed raising his children. Bitterness, despair, and anger would have all been understandable and expected. But over time, Mandela learned that love would do a better job than violence and rage.(Bono)

When he was released from prison, he could have called upon the wrath of his followers. But he understood that "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Vengeance is the Lord's decision, not our responsibility.

At Mandela's inauguration as President, his jailers were seated in the front row. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44 NRS)

It has been said that Mandela was guided by his hopes, not his fears. (Obama) One of the most often expressed exhortations in scripture is "Fear not!"

Mandela said, "We can transcend our differences by our oneness, by reconciliation." With Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a reconciliation commission was set up that brought healing that had seemed impossible. Paul told the Corinthians that God has given us a ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Mandela said, "A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dream of." Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Nelson Mandela was a man of peace and thus served God's purposes. His realistic outlook gave him the humility to say, "I am not a saint, but a sinner who keeps on trying."

G. K Chesterton famously said that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found hard and left untried. That's a cynical overstatement, but it's often true. Too often we are likely to choose righteous indignation and self-righteousness, rather than caring for the feelings of those who have hurt us. But Joseph chose not to humiliate Mary. The choice for personal peace can be made, even as hard as it can be sometimes.

Waging peace is as demanding and difficult as waging war – but the process and the results are far more pleasing to God. Gandhi, King, and Mandela have shown that living the teachings of Jesus can avert suffering and death on a massive scale. It is hard, very hard. But thousands of casualties, families destroyed, bodies maimed, and minds permanently damaged by physical and emotional trauma is much harder when we stop and count all of the cost of vengeance, hate, and war. Praying for peace can be easy and sanctimonious. Pray instead for the wisdom and strength to be an instrument of peace. The Prince of Peace is coming. May we all keep trying to welcome him into our homes and our hearts.

Go out into the world in peace.  
Love the Lord your God  
with all your heart,  
with all your soul,  
with all your mind;  
and love your neighbor as yourself.