

December 21, 2014 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Isaiah 9:2-7

TITLE: Endless Peace

The language of Advent gravitates to four words: love, hope, joy and peace. As Advent gives way to Christmas, we talk about love and our hopes for the New Year, and we sing “Joy to the World.” But the prayer most often on our lips at this time of year is peace. Peace on earth. When the Christmas Christ-child grew up and found himself hosting a last supper with his disciples, he also spoke about love, hope and joy. But when he wanted to give them something special, he said, *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; do not let them be afraid.*

We say the word “peace” a lot. People flash peace signs at one another. We tell kids to turn down the music so we can get some peace and quiet. But when we pray for peace, we are talking about something deeper. Real peace is not just the absence of war, but rather it’s the peace that comes after the last battle has been fought, when war is no more; it is a calm that comes, not when our hearts are quiet for a moment, but when all the burdens fall away and we are free at last.

750 years before Christ, the people of Israel were threatened with being overrun by the Assyrian Empire. OK, let’s be honest – no one really studies about the Assyrians anymore except rabbinical students, seminary students, and a handful of unemployed history grad students. Having said that, back in the 8th century BC the Assyrians were like Attila the Hun sweeping toward Europe or the Third Reich’s blitzkrieg through France that threatened the civilized world. In that time long ago of war and rumors of war, the prophet Isaiah offered a word of hope: *The people who walked/stumbled along in darkness have seen a great light – for to us a child has been born.* The child that was announced was given four titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The last title was so important that the next verse builds upon it and promises that from his authority there will be endless peace from that time on and forevermore.

For 750 years, people held onto that promise, ascribed at first to earthly rulers but later repeated as referring to a coming Messiah. Finally, in the fullness of time, Isaiah’s promise came true. Again in a time of oppression and war – Romans now instead of Assyrians – angel messengers appeared at night calling out to shepherds in a field saying, *Don’t be afraid. To you is born this day a Savior, the Messiah. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, goodwill among people.* Once again, the last words focused on what they most wanted and most needed to hear – the angels left them with a promise of peace.

Peace is no simple thing. About a week and half ago, I hurt my back. I share that information in a brazen attempt to get sympathy, chocolate, and to avoid all household chores. My physical therapists have reminded me that back troubles cannot be traced to a single muscle. Rather, they involve a whole network of

small and large muscles, tendons, bones and nerves. Healing back trouble involves work - doing daily exercises to re-train the muscles so that they will work together instead of locking up in painful spasms. In much the same way, peace is a complex thing. It involves deep connections between what is seen and what is unseen, what is visible in how we live together as well as the complex, invisible network of laws and practices that bind us together as a living, ever-changing, social organism. You can take a pill to get rid of your back pain, but no pill alone can cure you. We may wish for a magic pill to bring peace on earth, but peace doesn't happen that way. That's not to say that peace is impossible. But to help us find real peace, here are three secrets courtesy of the dear old prophet Isaiah.

Secret #1: Peace is the gift of the presence of God. Peace is a gift – unearned, unmerited. It is a light shining in darkness, and as you well know, light falls on both the just and unjust. So no false preening as if God only wants peace for us and not for them, whoever they might be.

Every Sunday we say “La paz de Cristo/ The peace of Christ.” Ideally you look someone in the eye and shake their hand or give them a hug as you say those words. But remember: you don't possess the peace of Christ, as if by your words you are now able to give it to someone else. By passing the peace, you are naming what has already been given to both of you, naming what is present all around you. The act is a mutual recognition of something wonderful already present – the peace of Christ! Therefore, if two people can shake hands and hug with Christ in their midst, with Christ's peace enfolding them, how is it possible to hate them, to cling to anger, to believe there is any value in war with them? More importantly, this gift of peace is not just within these walls. Where can you go where Christ is not? Who can you meet who is not known by Christ? Reflecting on these questions is the key to secret #1.

Secret #2: Christ's peace is never superficial; it is always deep. You've heard me say before that the language of the world prefers superficialities – sound bites, knee-jerk reactions, prejudices, biases and easy answers. The language of faith is a spiritual discipline – it asks deep and often unsettling questions so that what is kept in darkness may at last be healed and brought into the light. A couple of quick examples: Robert Moses was known as the famed master builder of New York City. Active before and after World War II, Moses built scores of highways and bridges that changed how people lived and moved around that great city. But his biographer, Robert Caro, names darker influences in Moses' work. Moses was unashamed and unapologetic about his racism. He believed that African Americans didn't like cold water, so he intentionally kept the water frigid in public pools to dissuade people of color from using them. Imagine that. Or when he designed the Long Island public parks in the 1930s, the only way for the poor people to reach them was by bus. So Moses intentionally built bridges over the parkways that were too low for buses to pass under them. Imagine that. Examples like these of intentional racism exist, but to see them you have to look deeply and consider their impact upon generations of people of color.¹

A second example: During a particularly bad, “get tough on crime” period in the 1990s, laws were passed that decreed some juveniles (as young as 13 years old) found guilty of crimes were to be sentenced to life in prison without chance of parole. This includes non-homicide cases and affects about 2500 prisoners. In 2006, the UN General Assembly called on all nations to abolish juvenile life without parole, which only one country opposed – the United States. Only in 2011 did the Supreme Court rule that sentencing juveniles to life without parole for non-homicide cases was unconstitutional. However, for Pennsylvania, this Supreme Court ruling is only considered valid for new cases. And guess what percent of non-homicide juvenile offenders sentenced to life without parole is persons of color? 100%.² Imagine that.

To get to the bottom of a problem, you have to do some digging. You have to ask questions. You have to explore and sometimes experience someone else’s pain yourself. But layers of complexity should never keep us from doing what is right. Peace, real peace, only comes when the foundation to the pinnacle of our social order is righteous, just, and exposed to the light of God’s mercy and truth.

Which leads to Secret #3: The gift of endless peace unfolds before us when we have a passionate, active faith. To step forward by faith is to step toward peace. Remember the first two secrets. The peace of Christ is all around us. It’s a free gift like light casting out darkness everywhere. We are to live as people of that light, committed to God’s peace and justice, no matter what laws have to be changed, what bridges have to be raised, what lynching trees have to be cut down, or what stockpiles of weapons, armor, and garments rolled in blood need to be burnt.

This desire for peace on earth is so close to the heart of God that God came into our broken world to hand-deliver it – in the form of a child. This gift is both personal peace (to us is born the wonderful counselor, the everlasting parent) and global peace (to all of us is born the mighty God and Prince of Peace). And this peace is endless because the One who gives it is eternal, unrelenting in zeal, desiring that all of us live in wholeness, love, faith, and joy.

This day see the concentric circles of peace. Peace comes to us when we open our hearts to Christ Jesus in a daily way so that all we do is done as his follower. Peace comes in our relationships when we walk together rejoicing in the gift of Christ’s peace that precedes us and totally surrounds us. Peace comes to America when we seek to be true to our Christian principles, respectful of others on their journeys yet passionate about the faith we profess, so that every complex aspect of our life together is considered in the light of Christ’s justice and righteousness. And endless peace comes when we live in the Now as if it were the Forever – when every Moment becomes God’s Moment. Isaiah was right - the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Thanks be to God.

¹ Robert Caro, “Author’s Note: Suddenly I Saw It Whole,” *New York Times Book Review*, December 14, 2014, p. 45.

² Nicholas Kristof, "A Shooter, His Victim and Race," *New York Times Sunday Review*, December 14, 2014; Equal Justice Initiative, *Cruel and Unusual: Sentencing 13-and 14-year-old Children to Die in Prison*, 2007; Maggie Clark, "How Will States Handle Juveniles Sentenced to Life Without Parole?," *USA Today*, Aug. 26, 2013.