

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2019 – “Impossible Possibility”

The Nativity of Our Lord, Year C – Texts: Micah 5:2-5; Luke 2:1-20

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A pastor was preaching on Christmas Eve and his sermon went quite long. His thoughts were scattered, he rambled on and it was difficult to follow. When he was greeting after the service one congregant surprised him when she commented, “Pastor, your sermon tonight reminded me of God’s peace and love.” The pastor was flattered. “Really? How so?” he asked. “Well, it reminded me of God’s peace in the way it surpassed all understanding! And it reminded me of God’s love because it seemed to endure forever!”

I’d like to share with you some thoughts tonight and while I’m all about God’s peace and love I do hope I avoid both of these pitfalls!

There’s a story about an old Jewish man who would get up at the break of dawn and go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which most people know as the “Wailing Wall”, and he would pray fervently from morning to evening. One day, a journalist from the London Times who’d observed him doing this day after day asked him, “You come every day to the wall. How long have you done this and what are you praying for?” The old man replied, “I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. I pray for peace and reconciliation among the people of this land who are so divided by hate and conflict.” The journalist was amazed. She asked him, “How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things when so much conflict remains?” The old man looked at her sadly, “Like I’m talking to a wall.”

Every year, around this time we hear Scripture passages and sing beloved Christmas carols about “peace on earth and good will to men.” We light candles and sing “Silent Night, all is calm, and all is bright.” It’s beautiful, perhaps even nostalgic for so many of us, but does it really make any difference? You look at the world around us and you see all the unrest, violence, pain and brokenness and you wonder...is peace really possible? Or you look at our nation you see deeper political division it seems than at any other time in modern U.S. history. You’ve seen the deep divisions across the country perhaps experienced them in your own communities, in your workplace and neighborhoods, maybe even in your own family. Is peace really possible?

Of course, we need not look around to see the signs of pain and brokenness. We look within ourselves and we find the restlessness in our own hearts, the divisions within. We feel the ache, the longing for something more, for our lives to be well and whole. Is peace really possible?

We can pray for peace within ourselves, our relationships, our nation and our world. We can yearn for it. Many do. But after a while, you do wonder, like the man at the Wailing Wall if you’re just talking to a wall. Is anyone listening? Or as one peace advocate put it, it can feel like your banging your head against a wall. And if you’re lucky you might make a tiny crack. The walls that divide us are so very high and so very strong. The world is not the way it’s supposed to be. But you didn’t need me to tell you that, you already know as much. Our lives are not the way they’re supposed to be. But there’s good news...God has something else in mind. It was on His mind in the beginning when He went about creating the world and everything in it.

A vision for shalom...a word we've heard before...likely many times. It's Hebrew and it gets translated as "peace," but it means so much more than what we tend to think. So much more...What does it mean? Wholeness. Flourishing. An interconnectedness of all things. The way things are intended to be. It means a right relationship with God, right relationship with others, right relationship with all of creation. But sin made a mess of things, disrupted this shalom, fractured the relationships, and up went the walls. Walls all around us. Walls between us. Walls within us. Our own hearts divided. But God refuses to leave the world a mess, fractured and broken. God refuses to have a world with so many walls, so many divisions. So what does God do? God enters into the mess, the darkness, the brokenness. God comes to be with us through all of the walls, all the barriers, all the barricades we've raised. God calls a people to be His covenant people, a light to the nations, a beacon to the rest of the weary world. Sometimes they live into this calling; much of the time they don't. But God's intent is to pull the world back together, break down the walls, restore His shalom, bring about His peace.

So Isaiah prophesies about it. He talks about a child who will be a light in the darkness. A Messiah. A Savior. One who will come to draw the world back together, bring things back as they were intended to be. Draw people back to God, usher in God's shalom; God's peace for all people for all the nations.

He has a name, "Wonderful Counselor", "Mighty God", "Everlasting Father", "Prince of Peace", Jesus, which means "God saves." And He has a face; the scrunched up, ruddy face of an infant so helpless and vulnerable, born into straw and poverty to a teenage mom and her fiancé. And He is bringing another kingdom, the one of which Isaiah speaks in the line of David, Israel's greatest king, a kingdom of peace where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream where they meet in peace in God's shalom. A peace that's not just the absence of conflict but the presence of something...justice, beauty, goodness, wholeness...God's very spirit. A peace in which the walls come down and we can finally be at peace with God, forgiven and freed and put back in right relationship so that we can experience peace with one another, overcome our divisions and move toward one another in love and understanding. And nations can beat their weapons into ploughshares and learn war no more. This child brings this peace, makes this peace which seems impossible – possible! Swiss theologian Karl Barth called this the "impossible possibility." Where a God who is able to do what we, in our own striving and effort, cannot do. This child who would grow up into a man, fully human and fully God, and who would lay down his life in a sacrifice of love. Only to bust forth from the tomb three days later and be crowned Lord of all. The impossible possibility. And now the world can **really** be different. The apostle Paul declares it this way in Ephesians: **"But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace. In His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is, the hostility between us that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two Thus making peace. So He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near."** No wonder the angels sang out on that first Christmas day "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom He favors!"

The 2005 movie *Joyeux Noelle* (zhway-you) tells the true story of the famous “Christmas Eve Truce” of 1914. Kaiser Wilhelm II had sent thousands of Christmas trees to the front lines on the Western Front in order to boost the morale of the German troops. After the trees were set up over their trenches in sight of the enemies’ lines a German soldier began to sing the beloved Christmas hymn “Stille Nacht” – “Silent Night.” His strong tenor voice pierces the cold, wintery night as enemy armies sit in their trenches gripping their rifles.

“Silent Night, Holy Night,

“All is calm, all is bright.

“Round yon virgin, mother and child.

“Holy infant so tender and mild.

“Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

Soon the French and Scottish troops huddled in their separate barracks begin to sing along in their own languages. Then something remarkable happened. Slowly, soldiers from all sides began to climb out of their trenches without their weapons. They engage each other in conversation, exchange gifts and then participate in Christmas Eve services together! In the movie, a fictional character is added, a world-class soprano to sing along with the great tenor. It is the beauty of their singing, the beauty of the gospel, and its message of peace that made up the content of their song that breaks through the political dividing walls of hostility and unites these sworn enemies in joy and tears.

And so tonight we sing

Hail the Heaven born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings,

risen with healing in his wings.”

And we will hear LeeAnne sing these words from “O Holy Night”...

Truly he taught us to love one another.

His law is love and his gospel is peace.

Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother.

And in his name all oppression shall cease.

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we...

Let all within us praise his holy name.”

In this child born in Bethlehem, a kingdom of peace has come. A kingdom of peace that is not yet here in completion. So the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us to join God in this work of peace that He is in the process of bringing about in the world. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be sons and daughters of God. Let it begin with each of us. Let it begin within our own hearts.

What is impossible for us is now made possible with God. May God give us courage to bear witness to the impossible possibility of a different kind of world to a way of peace, heavenly peace. A peace that's not only possible but will be a reality when Christ returns, and the glory of the Lord floods the whole earth!

Even so...Come now, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.