

2006 Advent Sermon Series: Peace on Earth

“Universal Peace”

Micah 5:1-4a Luke 1:39-55

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms UMC on December 24, 2006

In this Advent season we have spoken of peace. “Peace on Earth” the angels’ sang on the night of Jesus’ birth, and we are bold to believe that good news. The coming of Jesus means the coming of peace.

This peace is real in every sense of the word. The peace of Christmas is a personal peace. That is, it is the inner peace of the heart that cannot be taken away from us. Christmas means God is with us. That which is ultimate shines upon us with favor. If God is for us, who is against us? Nothing can separate us from the love of God. This knowledge, deep in our hearts, is the personal peace that passes understanding.

The peace of Christmas is a way of living. The way of peace is the way Jesus lived. The way of peace is the way of the cross, which is not the way of submission, but the overcoming of evil with steadfast love. When your oppressor strikes you on the right cheek with the back of his right hand, stand firm and turn to him you left cheek to let him know that you are his equal and you will not respond in kind. When the occupying power forces you to go a mile with his load, go a second mile and take away his initiative. Do not be intimidated. Respond to the violence of this world neither with more violence nor with submission, but the creative third way that is determined to defy injustice and proclaim that even the enemy is loved by God.

The peace of Christmas is a just peace. It is the peace described by John the Baptist, when the poor with only two garments and a little food share with the destitute who are naked and hungry. It is when those who have cheated the poor or gained through intimidation return what they have taken and repent of their ways.

The peace of Christmas is a personal peace, a non-violent way-of-living peace and a just peace. And when all of this happens, then there is universal peace. This is the very real promise of Christmas – not a metaphor – not an in-heaven-only kind of peace – but an on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven peace. It is the angels glorifying God in heaven because of the reality that God’s good will has come to all people and on earth there is peace.

Poets have envisioned that peace. John Milton gives us the image of all creation realizing at the moment of Jesus’ birth the true significance of the event.

It was the winter wild,
While the Heaven born child,
All meanly wrapped in the rude manger lies;

Nature in awe of Him Had doff'd her gaudy trim,
With her great master so to sympathize.
And waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

No war, or battle's sound,
Was heard the world around:
The idle spear and shield were hung up high;

The crooked chariot stood
Unstained with hostile blood;
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng;
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

But peaceful was the night,
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began:
The winds with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kiss'd,
Whispering new joys to the mild ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

But Oh, we say, that is just a poem. The first Christmas was not really like that. Just a poem? Just a story? There is power in poetry. The world is changed by the stories we tell. This event, the birth of this child, the coming of God into the reality of our world, the more poems we write, the more carols we sing, the more ways that we tell the story, the more our lives and our world will become the story we tell.

The prophet Micah relates the promise of the coming of a new ruler, the one of peace who will set things right again in Israel and whose justice will extend throughout the earth. This ruler will come, says Micah, from the little town of Bethlehem.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

Another translation for the word little would be “insignificant.” Great changes are coming to the world, says Micah, but don’t look to the seats of power to see them coming. Don’t look to Jerusalem, but little Bethlehem, where long ago a shepherd by the name of David rose to prominence.

Luke tells us the name of the Emperor in Rome, the King in Jerusalem and the Roman governor in Palestine, but the really important person was a young woman in out of the way Galilee. God’s purpose is accomplished in out-of-the-way places. The lowly are exalted. Transformation happens from the bottom up.

It was President Dwight D. Eisenhower who said, “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.”

God will accomplish the peace that was promised in the angels’ song. Presidents and Prime Ministers will play a minor role. It will happen because we live the story we tell. It will happen because we don’t treat the Christmas story as a dream, but as a concrete reality. It will happen because rather than allowing “Peace on Earth” to be simply a phrase we put on Christmas cards, it has become a tenet of our faith. To be a Christian is to know the personal peace of Christ, to live the non-violent way of Jesus, to live justly with our neighbors and to tell the story of God’s love so compellingly that all the world will know, live and experience this peace.