

Community Church of Issaquah
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Where Can We Find Peace?
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It's very difficult to avoid the news these days, even if we try. I'm not really a CNN viewer, though I used to be. And I don't listen to NPR on the radio as I'm driving around anymore either. Perhaps I'm foolishly trying to avoid life's reality these days, but I prefer to look elsewhere for good news or a happy story. But even when I try to avoid it, up pops a story or sometimes just a photo for protesters from both sides of the Middle East conflict. One thing they seem to have in common is seen on some of the signs they carry. Two words. 'Peace now.'

It seems that whenever we hear the word peace, we automatically connect it to war or conflict. Surely, all of us want that. Stop the wars and conflicts. Stop the fighting that divides our country. Stop the hateful acts that harm others. Peace. Let us just have peace. I want that, and so did the people at the time Christ. When the angels spoke to the shepherds sharing the good news of the birth of Jesus, you heard them say some interesting words,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all on whom his favor rests."

There was no promise there that any conflict would come to an end. There was simply a promise that peace would come to those who were faithful believers. The same is true today for you and me and every believer. God cannot put an end to war, though we all wish that were a possibility.

The angels promised a different kind of peace, and that is the peace we all seek at Christmas and through the entire year. Let me share a few words from a bishop of another faith, Bishop Steven Charleston who was the bishop of the Episcopal dioceses of Alaska for many years.

Praying for peace in times of war can feel like facing a dragon with a paper sword. But we know that is only an illusion. War is not all-powerful, inevitable or unstoppable. Its origins are in the same place as peace: in the human heart. When we pray for peace, we pray to reach the hearts of other human beings, on all sides of the conflict, to restore a sense of compassion and hope. We seek to pour the water of life onto the flames of hate, one person at a time, until the rage subsides. So please, keep praying with me for peace, no matter how tempted you may be to despair. Confront the dragon with your love, as you work in every way you can, for the cause of peace.

Tucked into those words is one profound truth about the peace we all seek during the holidays. “When we pray for peace, we pray to reach the hearts of other human beings.” If we stop and narrow down what the coming of Christ, the birth of Jesus, meant for those in his day, we understand better that he came to change the lives of people one at a time. There was no large movement to change government, there was no call to battle other tribes, there was no effort to stop any conflict that was happening. There was a simple mission to change the lives of individuals.

Looking at the lives of those at the center of this amazing story about the birth of Jesus, do you think they were a part of God's chosen on whom God's favor rests? Our passage today talked about the shepherds. Were their lives changed? Did they find a sense of peace in learning that God had indeed fulfilled his promise to send a Messiah? What about Joseph and Mary? What kind of peace did they find from having their lives changed forever by God's choice of them to parent the Promised One? This kind of peace had nothing to do with war. It was the peace of knowing that one by one, lives were changed.

The message of the Bible is simple. Love everyone. It is when we engage in the act of loving not only those around us, but strangers as well that we are able to give peace. If we are in conflict with someone and make the effort to forgive and move past, we not only give peace to that person but we can find peace in our own life. In our society or world today, we tend to focus on gift giving as the center of Advent and Christmas. That is certainly a Christlike quality that we should all practice. Yet we might miss the point that when we choose to give peace to others, one by one, we have given one of faith's greatest gifts. When Jesus spoke in the Beatitudes and said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God," he was not speaking of wars or conflicts, he was speaking about each of us giving another one peace, the kind of peace that comes by loving and forgiving.

Peace is bigger than making peace with others. Let's turn our attention inward for a bit. What does peace mean to us? Where do we find it? The truth is, we find it in our

own home, in our own lives. There has never been a time when I have enjoyed personal conflict. There was an abundance of that growing up in a wounded family. There was plenty of that when I was forced out of the church I had chosen and that had chosen me. There has been plenty of that in dealing with my spouse's medical issues of a myriad of types for 25 years. Those are the large ones. But there are more than a few small ones that I encounter, and the same for you.

The candle we lit this morning representing "peace" is lit for that very purpose. Are we seeking peace with others? Ask yourself if you are at peace with everyone in your life. If you're like me, I have work to do in this area, as perhaps you might as well. I've been told often that holding a grudge or resentment has a much deeper effect on me than on the person whom I am not at peace with. Usually that person or company or whatever has no idea that we are struggling with our inner conflicts. But in order to move past this and find true peace in our lives, we have to pray for peace to reach the heart of others.

At the same time, we must pray for peace in our own heart. I asked myself, "Vincent, are you at peace?" Even deeper, am I at peace with God. That's a tough question to answer. When I do ask myself that hard question, I have to admit that there are places in my own heart and mind, in my own life where I struggle with inner peace. I have to understand that if I truly want peace for all, it must begin with me as the Scriptures say, then I need to first examine what is happening in my own life. Do I have peace myself? It is certainly difficult to have inner peace when life gives you

one struggle after another and you spend much, too much time with your mind racing about what will happen and what you can do and what the solution is.

None of us are exempt from difficulties that cause us anxiety and fear. I have those, and I assume you do as well. Our minds are sometimes flooded with a multitude of questions that cause us to clutter our lives with unanswered questions. What's going on? What's wrong? How can I fix that? Is this ever going to change? Questions like that. And it's when our own hearts are burdened with the unknown that we struggle to find inner peace. It's not a simple task to even address this issue. I can sit each morning in my prayer and meditation time and pray for solutions or peace, but that does not guarantee that I will automatically be at ease and worry will dissolve.

How do we find inner peace? For me, it comes down to one simple act of faith – trusting the Prince of Peace to both guide me and even at times carry me through the dark times until I do find an inner peace. Does it come instantly? No. But as believers, we have Scripture that advises us to “Lean not upon our own understanding, but in all our ways, acknowledge him and he will direct our path.” To experience peace in our lives, we must also be diligent about practicing our faith.

As you see, the concept of peace is a bit more complicated than we might have thought. There is worldly peace in which we want all fighting, hatred and harm to cease and to allow peace – the absence of any ungodly acts – to come to our world. Viewing the news these days, that seems to

be a goal far into the future. One in which we might be saying, "Lord Jesus, quickly come back!" Second, there is the peace we must make with one another, one person at a time. When the Bible talks about atonement, it teaches us that we must not only practice forgiveness of others, but seek forgiveness for ourselves. We will never know true peace as long as we carry the burden of hate, resentment or the feeling of having been used or abused.

Perhaps the most important aspect of peace for me this year and every year is that I desperately want inner peace. I want my life to be freed of the burden of worry or fear. If I were to make a Christmas List, it would have that request for inner peace at the top of the list, just above more Starbucks gift cards. But seriously, my hope for each of us is that we will stop at some time during these hectic days and ask the Prince of Peace to show you where inner peace is waiting for you. That will indeed be your greatest gift as we celebrate this season of Jesus's birth that did indeed bring peace to so many. And it still does to this day.