

Prince of Peace

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Isaiah 9:2-6

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
 on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation,
 you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden,
 and the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
 and all the garments rolled in blood
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
 a son given to us;
 authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SHALOM

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, and today we consider the fourth title for the Messiah in Isaiah's prophecy, ... Prince of Peace.

How would the Messiah be a Prince of Peace?

The word translated "peace" is the Hebrew word, "shalom."

Shalom means more than just the absence of conflict. Shalom means to promote the general welfare. Shalom means to create the conditions that promote peace.

Shalom is at once a divine blessing, a challenge to society and a sense of inner peace.

King Solomon's name was a derivative of the word shalom. And so his name expressed the hope of God's people for his reign.

After the conflicts and political intrigue of his father, David it would have been nice to have a king who would bring a time of peace and prosperity. Unfortunately Solomon didn't live up to his name. His reign consisted of a military build up and the exploitation of his people for cheap labor.

This did not promote shalom.

In fact there was such resistance to the policies of Solomon that there was open rebellion when this king died. And, as a result of this conflict, God's people eventually divided into two kingdoms, the ten tribes of the northern kingdom, Israel and the two tribes of the southern kingdom, Judah.

The division proved to be a disaster, both spiritually and from a military standpoint. The diaspora, the scattering of God's people all over the world by the Assyrians, and the exile to Babylon were a direct result of these decisions that went against the biblical concept of shalom.

This should have served as a warning to the people.

"Peace" that is based upon military might and the exploitation of people will not be a peace that lasts. This approach will create deep division.

The seeds of violence and destruction are sown in a society that lives by the sword and exploits those who are weak. True peace, shalom is built upon a society that is just and righteous.

But, God's people did not always learn from their history. We, of course, are the same way.

The Old Testament details a struggle to understand and accept shalom, God's peace.

Sometimes, the prophets imagined a time when people would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations would not learn war any more and the people could live in peace and not be afraid. (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-5)

There's a famous sculpture that sits in the front of the United Nations that depicts this day of shalom. It will be a time when weapons of war will be converted to instruments of peace.

(One interesting modern application of this concept is the dismantlement of nuclear weapons and using the nuclear material to make fuel for power plants. This initiative is called the Megatons to Megawatts Program.)

On the other hand many of our attempts to bring about peace have been abject failures.

The destruction of Aleppo and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East are prime examples. The United Nations is often a place marked by corruption and contentious posturing instead of the peacemaking body was supposed to be.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Let there be peace on earth?

That's a good idea, but then there's the reality of a violent and sinful world.

Peace will not come from good wishes or good ideas. We need more than that.

The prophet Jeremiah realized that peace had become nothing more than a convenient political slogan. The king's counselors were telling him what he wanted to hear, that they would win the victory and obtain the peace they wanted.

But, there could be no peace without justice and righteousness.

And so the prophet wrote,

“For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;

and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:13-14)

"Peace" without justice and righteousness is not peace at all. In order for there to be real peace, God's shalom, things have to change.

Unjust governments would need to change their ways. And God's people would need to base their life not on greed but service and love.

The prophet Isaiah realized that before there could be a reign of peace could become a reality, the old way of life would have to be destroyed.

The rod of the oppressor would have to be broken.
The boots of the tramping warrior, and the blood soaked clothes worn in battle would have to become fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:4-5)

HOPE FOR A MESSIAH

How could that be accomplished when the hand of the oppressor seemed so strong?

God would have to intervene.

God would send a Messiah.

And this Messiah would be the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

For many years the people waited for this Messiah to come.

They dreamed of the peaceable where the "wolf would lie down with the lamb." (Isaiah 11:6)

They remembered Ezekiel's promise of an everlasting "covenant of peace." (Ezekiel 34:25, 37:26)

They dreamed but their dreams were never fulfilled.

The rod of the oppressor was never totally broken.

In fact it seemed like the history of God's people was the history of one bad ruler after another.

As we've talked about over the past few weeks, when Jesus was born, things seemed particularly bad.

For one thing crazy Herod was "king."
And the power behind the throne of this madman was the Roman Empire.

The Romans had their own version of peace.
They called it "Pax Romana". (That's about all the Latin I remember from my high school Latin class! And I'm sure you can guess what it means ... the Roman Peace.)

But, the title was very misleading.

This Roman peace was anything but peaceful.
It was a "peace" enforced with the iron fist of military might and persecution.

The cross of Jesus was not the first cross that dotted the hillside in the Promised Land.

So into this land where sorry prophets and politicians still pronounced "peace, peace" where there was not peace, Jesus was born.

NOT THE MESSIAH THEY EXPECTED

The prophecy said that the Messiah would be the "Prince of Peace". The Messiah would be the son of a king who would use his power and influence for the good of the people.

But, in many ways Jesus did not seem to fit the Messiah profile. For one thing he was certainly no prince.

He was born in a cattle stall in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. This was a town so bad that everyone who came from that place lived under a cloud of suspicion and doubt.

"Can anything good come from Nazareth?"
Not likely, the people said.

But, the humble circumstances of his upbringing was not the only problem with Jesus being called a “prince”. Jesus did not act the way a “Prince of Peace” should act.

Many believed the Messiah would be a warrior king who would establish God’s kingdom by force.

There would be peace all right.

It would be a “peace” that would look ever so much like the “Pax Romana” under which they now lived. It would be an established by military victory and absolute rule.

The only difference would be that now the “shoe would be on the other foot.”

The Jews would be in charge instead of the Romans. The Roman weapons of war would be destroyed. When that happened then there would be peace.

But, of course we know that Jesus wasn’t like that.

Much to the chagrin of his disciples and those that wanted to make him king, Jesus saw the Kingdom of God in a way that seemed to contradict the prophecy of Isaiah.

Yes, Jesus was indeed the Prince of Peace.

He was the child born of God.

But, he was not going to win the victory on the battlefield.

As we’ve said before... He was the Messiah.

But, He was *not* the Messiah they expected.

The kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus proved to be quite different from the kingdoms of this world. The peace that Jesus brought was a peace based upon service and love and forgiveness.

The peace that Jesus brought was not based upon military might but upon vulnerability and sacrifice.

He would be the crucified Messiah.

The cross would be his throne from which he would proclaim forgiveness for his enemies.

PRINCE OF PEACE

For the kingdoms of this world, it must have seemed as crazy as strawberry pizza.

Actually, it seemed more than crazy.
It seemed dangerous. It seemed subversive.

They thought the teachings of Jesus would tear down their way of life.

From the very beginning of the story the battle lines are drawn.
Herod the king wants to know where the baby born a king is located ... so that he can "worship him."

Not likely.
Earthly kings don't keep their power by worshipping a pretender to the throne.
His savage actions later in the story confirm this.

And the worst part is this.
The murderous Herod didn't have to kill the innocents.
He had no reason to be worried.

Jesus would have no political ambition.
Jesus was not going to be Herod's kind of king.
Jesus was not going to be like a Jewish Roman Emperor.

He was going to be God's kind of king.
He was going to be a Prince of Peace.
Jesus was not going to conquer the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus was going to transform the whole world through his peace. And this peace would be based upon grace.

The announcement of his birth by angels gives us a clue that this King and Kingdom are going to be different. After all, what kind of king has his king-

dom announced in the middle of the night ... not to the movers and shakers in the world ... but to lowly shepherds?

God's kind of King.

This would be a King for the downcast and the defeated. This would be a Kingdom for the widow and the orphan and the homeless immigrant.

GUILT AND FORGIVENESS

In the ministry of Jesus we see a portrait of what shalom, God's peace is really about.

It is not about tearing down but about building up.
It's about transforming the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God by the breathtaking power of forgiveness.

Tennyson wrote that "there are more things wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." I think that's true.

But, to paraphrase Tennyson I think this is also true,
"There are also more things wrought by guilt than this world dreams of."

I would describe guilt in the words of our lesson for today.

Guilt causes the people to walk in deep darkness and live in a land of deep darkness.

The seeds of guilt manifest itself in our personal lives and in our greater society.

On a personal level guilt brings about or worsens physical and mental problems.

Often our relationships with family and friends are harmed because of guilt.

Sometimes we try to escape guilt by placing the blame on someone or something else.

Or, just as bad, we take all the blame and become depressed.

But, the fastest way to escape the power of guilt is the route of forgiveness. Forgiveness is real.

It is the source of peace.

There's a reason I make it point to have a prayer of confession each and every week that is followed by a declaration of pardon.

"Hear the good news of the gospel.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

All of us need to hear that every day.

But, I know that on any particular week there is someone who needs to hear it more than most. There is someone who can be cured with a word of forgiveness from the Lord.

There is someone who needs to receive a Word of peace from the Prince of Peace.

PEACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In Luke's gospel the declaration of peace is more than just a way to say hello or goodbye.

God's peace has the power to transform lives wracked by guilt and pain. For example, Jesus tells the "sinful" woman who has anointed him, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:50)

A little bit later in Luke's story Jesus heals a woman who had spent her life savings seeking a cure for her illness.

But, Jesus does more than heal her physically. He heals her spiritually as well. He tells her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." (Luke 8:48)

People who are sick and tired of being sick and tired have more than physical problems.

They have spiritual problems as well.
They are angry and disappointed.
The peace of Christ can fix that.

And Jesus told his disciples that his peace would be a part of their ministry tool kit.

Whenever they would go to a house to proclaim the gospel they were to say,
 “Peace be upon this house.” (Luke 10:5-6)

The first word we speak in Jesus’ name should always be a word of peace.

The implications of this peace go beyond personal relationships. They also affect our relationships in the wider world.

One of the most poignant scenes in the Bible occurs when Jesus looks out over Jerusalem and weeps. He knows that they are on the path to destruction. He says, “If only you had recognized the things that make for peace...”

In this particular passage Jesus doesn’t elaborate on the things that make for peace.

But, we know. The Bible makes it plain.

A peaceful society is based upon the same principles that make for a peaceful person ...

... forgiveness, humility, serving others out of gratitude, loving your neighbor as yourself ... You guys know all this stuff.

These are the things that make for peace.

But, sometimes, like the people of Jerusalem long ago, we fail to recognize these things.

Disciples of Jesus are called to point out the ways that lead to peace.

Long ago Jesus healed people and pronounced a word of forgiveness upon them.

“Peace be with you”, he said.

These were more than just isolated instances of healing and forgiveness. They were signs of the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom.

PASSING THE PEACE

Not everyone would see and understand these signs.

Many would adopt the ways of the Empire, putting themselves and their own interests first.

It would result in disaster.

It would destroy the very thing they were trying to protect.

But, it wouldn't be the end.

It wouldn't be the final chapter in God's plan.

The power of God's peace would prove to be stronger than the ways of the world.

In John's gospel, the risen Christ leaves the disciples with these words, "Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

The disciples went.

They spread this new notion of peace despite the threats and the persecution of the Empire.

They spread this notion of peace despite being called traitors and heretics by their own people.

And now, years later the struggle continues.

Today Jesus tells us, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

It is our job to pass the peace.

That might seem like too big a job for us.

But, Jesus said that the Kingdom doesn't have to start with something really big.

The Kingdom is like a mustard seed ... very, very small. But, in God's hands, it grows and grows.

So the Messiah is called the Prince of Peace.

In a world filled with anger and despair it's still hard to believe in a Messiah like that.

But, today, in small, out of the way places the angels still sing to the shepherds.

And the message echoes throughout the countryside ... peace on earth.

It's not a dream.

It's the Kingdom that comes ...

for he will be called the Prince of Peace.

Amen.