

God's Peace

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

Peace.

***Peace** I leave with you; **my peace** I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

Do you remember those words from the Gospel of John? Keep them in mind; they're important for today.

Welcome to the Second Sunday in Advent; Peace Sunday.

If there is such a thing as a milquetoast theme for Advent, it HAS to be "peace".

Let me explain that term... "milquetoast": It means "weak", "wimpy", or basically meaningless. The greeting card companies have made a fortune with the idea...gentle snow-covered hills, lambs, shepherds, all warm and fuzzy stuff. (Unless you live in the Southern hemisphere, then it's more Santa putting shrimp on the barbie.)

Still it's all lovely stuff, isn't it?

BAH, HUMBUG!

Forgive me, but I can't help but call humbug when I SEE IT!

Personally, I think "peace" has become an almost meaningless word. When you are a kid, what did "peace" mean to you? Seriously! What do you think of when you think of the word "peace" from your childhood?

Most likely, if you were like me, you heard it most, from a harried mother who shouted something like, "can I have just a little peace and quiet around here?" Or adults who wanted the kids OUTSIDE, so they could have some "peace!"

Or maybe it was a political slogan...as a child of the 60's it was all like, "peace, man" ...whatever that meant.

Peace...

Now, today, what does that word mean to you?

Too often, peace is associated with an absence of violence; meaning, if there isn't a war, then there is peace. But that's not really true, is it? Peace is SO much more than that. We KNOW that, but we often forget it.

You see, when we start to define peace as the absence of something, rather than the presence of something, we have already missed the mark. Remember those words from John's Gospel?

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

I do not give to you as the world gives. Think about that for a moment. Just exactly what DOES that mean? We think we know what peace means: "peace in our times", peace is the absence of violence, right?

As Christians, too often we have been co-opted by the world's view of what peace is, what it means. We have taken the low road, the easy way, the broad path and not the always the way of Christ. Today, Peace Sunday, is our time to reflect on just exactly what that means.

The prophet Malachi gave us a hint. Do you remember his words?

I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. Those were Malachi's words. But what did he say next?

² *But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? That doesn't sound all that peaceful...*

For he is like a refiner's fire and he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

That CERTAINLY doesn't sound like a Milquetoast definition of Peace to me! Refiner's fire? To be purified? Until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness? This is getting a LOT more serious than warm, fluffy sheep! But heck, maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe peace IS a lot more like the greeting card companies would like us to believe. Maybe there is warm and fluffy after all? After all, this is "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" right?

So, let's keep looking. What did the good doctor, the literate and clinical Luke have to say? I'll warn you now, if you are looking for peaceful sheep and starry nights, this is NOT the place to look.

In talking about John, he wrote:

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

And he continued;

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God

THAT certainly doesn't sound like a warm and fluffy idea to me! Perhaps the "Prince of Peace" is more of an "action hero" and less of a Milquetoast!

OK, so if we can't define "peace" as an absence of conflict or an absence of war, what, then, IS peace?

I'm glad you asked.

We must understand that the biblical concept of peace is larger than the concept of the world and that it rests heavily on the Hebrew root *slm*, which means "to be complete" or "to be sound." The verb conveys both a dynamic and a static meaning "to be complete or whole" or "to live well."

The noun had many nuances but can be grouped into categories: (1) *shalom* as wholeness of life or body; (2) *shalom* as right relationship or harmony between two parties or people, often established by a covenant (3) *shalom* as prosperity, success, or fulfillment.

As people of faith, we MUST understand that Peace is not a matter of no violence and cannot be legislated. God alone is the source of peace, for He is "Yahweh Shalom".

We proclaim a Gospel where the Lord came to sinful humankind, historically first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, desiring to enter into a relationship with them. He established with them a covenant of peace, which was sealed with His presence. Participants were given perfect peace, so long as they maintained a right relationship with the Lord.

Let me say that last one more time: *Participants were given perfect peace, so long as they maintained a right relationship with the Lord.*

God's peace was be mediated through a messiah. This is the simple but stunning understanding that Peace with God came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter declared to Cornelius: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all".

What does that mean to us, this Peace Sunday?

The Lord established a covenant, which resulted in the participants receiving His shalom in abundance, "like a river".

However, and this part is CRITICAL: *Peace could be disturbed if one did not live before the Lord and others in righteousness*; in fact, peace is one of the fruits of righteousness.

Paul explained it this way: "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile".

One of the key issues among the prophets of old was the doctrine of "peace." The false prophets proclaimed "peace, peace" and in that announcement hoped to create peace for their constituency. This was a peace built on the wishes and hopes for peace.

The true prophets argued that peace could never be achieved apart from righteousness and justice. In this light, one can better understand what Jesus meant when he declared, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword".

Do you understand? We will not experience this peace until we have a right relationship with Yahweh. Peace is a VERB and not a NOUN. It is about what we are doing, who we are, the decisions we make, how we live. Peace can ONLY happen in our lives when we live in righteousness and justice. Our peace, or lack thereof, is controlled in large part by our relationship with the Prince of Peace

Peace Sunday isn't saying, "Jesus, give us a break and make things nice for us". To the contrary, it IS saying it's time to roll up our sleeves, take some faith responsibility and become active proponents of the Peace of Christ. What does that mean?

Peace is when:

1. Everyone lives in **safety**, without fear or threat of violence, and no form of violence is tolerated in law or in practice
2. Everyone is equal before the law, the systems for justice are trusted, and **fair and effective laws** protect people's rights
3. Everyone is able to **participate** in shaping political decisions and the government is accountable to the people
4. Everyone has fair and equal access to the basic needs for their **wellbeing** – such as food, clean water, shelter, education, healthcare and a decent living environment
5. Everyone has an equal opportunity to work and **make a living**, regardless of gender, ethnicity or any other aspect of identity

This second Sunday of Advent is Peace Sunday...and it looks like we have our work cut out for us.