

Sermon December 10, 2023

Finding Peace in the Midst of War

[Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8] Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Amen.

How many of you have heard of the story of the Christmas Truce? Perhaps a few. The Christmas Truce is an event that took place over a century ago. According to A.J. Baime and Volker Janssen of the History Channel, it went something like this:

On Christmas Eve 1914, in the muddy trenches on the Western Front of World War One, a remarkable thing happened. It came to be called the Christmas Truce, and it remains one of the strangest moments of the Great War, or of any war in history.

A British machine gunner wrote about it in his memoirs. Like most of his fellow infantry men, he was spending the holiday eve shivering in the muck, trying to keep warm. He had been fighting the Germans for several months, and now he was crouched in a tiny trench, his days and nights marked by an endless cycle of sleeplessness and fear.

At about 10 pm on Christmas Eve, he noticed a noise. "I listened, he recalled. Away across the field, among the dark shadows beyond, I could hear the murmur of voices. He turned to a fellow soldier in his trench.

"You hear the Germans kicking up all that racket over there?" he asked.

"Yes," came the reply. "They've been at it some time."

The Germans were singing Christmas carols, as it was Christmas Eve. In the darkness, some of the British soldiers began to sing back... (It kinda gives me goosebumps.)

Suddenly, the British soldier recalled, we heard shouting from the other side. We all stopped to listen. The shout came again. The voice was from an enemy soldier speaking in English with a strong German accent. He was saying, "Come over here."

One of the British sergeants answered, "You come halfway, I come halfway."

What happened next would stun the world. Enemy soldiers began to climb nervously out of their trenches to meet in the No Man's Land that separated the armies.

Normally, the British and Germans communicated across No Man's Land with streaking bullets. But now, there were handshakes and words of kindness.

The British soldier, presumably like any of us, could not believe his eyes. Here they were, he says, actual soldiers of the German army. And there was not one iota of hate on either side.

The Truce it turned out, wasn't confined to that one battlefield. Starting on Christmas Eve, small pockets of French, German, Belgian, and British troops held impromptu ceasefires across the Western Front. Some accounts suggest a few of these unofficial truces remained in effect for days.

By all accounts, one could almost reckon it a miracle.

I share this story with you to underscore our theme for the second Sunday of Advent: Peace.

Now Advent wreaths as you know, contain four candles, each of which symbolizes a theme--can you tell me what they are? The first theme of Advent, the first Sunday, is Hope. The second Sunday, today, is... Peace. The third--okay now it gets harder--the third Sunday is... Joy. Very good! And the fourth? Love. (Nicely done. Not surprised. Very nicely done.)

The first candle, then, represents Hope, as we just discussed. Here, we are led to anticipate the birth of Christ. As I was preaching in the children's sermon earlier, I thought, "Here is where we practice waiting. One piece of chocolate at a time." That's the first Sunday of Advent. The candle, as you know, is purple. And it's also called the Prophecy Candle. Harkening back to the foretelling of Christ's coming in the Book of Isaiah, as well as more broadly, the promises of God throughout the Hebrew Bible, that Christians believe are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. So the first candle is Hope.

The second candle, as you know, is Peace. It, too, is purple. (I was so happy that Jenna lit the right candle! If I was in your shoes, I would have probably messed that up and lit the pink candle. You did a great job.) The second Sunday, Peace; the candle is purple. And this is called the Bethlehem Candle. After the destruction, division, and dispersion of God's Kingdom in the Old Testament, the thinking goes, this candle symbolizes the coming of Jesus and with him God's reign of peace.

The third candle represents Joy. It reminds us of the joyful anticipation on the part of the shepherds, who journeyed to see Jesus before the wise men. Where did they find Jesus? In Bethlehem. Pink is the liturgical color for joy, and this candle is called, not surprisingly, the Shepherd's Candle.

The fourth candle represents Love. It symbolizes the ultimate love of God, whereby God's sacrifices God's transcendence, that is, God's position above us, to become among us, or God with us, in the person of Jesus Christ. This candle is purple. Its purpose is to lead us eagerly as we await the kingdom of God on earth. One where God's love will be consummated, and God, as Paul says in First Corinthians, will be all in all. What is this candle? We call it the Angels' Candle.

So there you have it. Hope, peace, joy, and love.

But here's the strange thing. We are celebrating the second Sunday of Advent, which is the Sunday of Peace. Yet none of our lectionary readings mention the word "peace." That's the conundrum. That's part of what makes my calling so difficult! Take a listen to 2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

So the Lord has us wait so that all of us may come to repentance.

Again, verse 13, in the second reading,

But in accordance with His promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

We wait.

And then again in the Gospel of Mark, verse 3,

Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight again."

That is why some people refer to today's candle as the Preparation Candle. Bu I prefer "Peace." Again, the trouble is that none of our readings explicitly *speak* of it: with one exception. Can you guess? Psalm 85.

Psalm 85, which we sang between the first and second reading; let's consider it. This is a remarkable Psalm, in my view. Listen closely to verses 1-9 and 12, as if they were being spoken to you personally. The author writes:

You have been gracious to your land, O Lord,
you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.

Here's the part that applies to you and me:

You have forgiven the iniquity of your people.

That is to say our self-centeredness, or what St. Augustine calls our "turned-inwardness."

You have forgiven the iniquity of your people.

I often think of the confession of "what we have done and left undone"

and blotted out all their or all your sins.

Again, verse 9, listen as if this was being spoken to you:

Truly your salvation

...which one scholar translates as real health; wholeness;

your salvation is very near to those who fear you,
that your glory may dwell in our land.

Or again, listen to this as if it was being spoken to you, Verse 12:

The Lord will indeed grant prosperity and our land will increase its yield.

Lots of promises, spoken once to Israel, now perhaps spoken indirectly to us. But what's the basis for these promises? Why *does* this author proclaim and hope for the forgiveness of sins? Why does this author proclaim and hope for the restoration of Israel after it was overtaken by the Babylonians? The answer seems to be this: What God did in the past, God can do again.

Let me repeat that.

The basis for hope is this: what God did in the past for our ancestors, God can do again.

In his wonderful book *God has a Dream*, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks of his basis for hope after the ending of apartheid. He says, "I watched as apartheid was dismantled. I participated in its dismantling. I have seen what the Lord can do. And it's because of that, that I hope for what the Lord will do, going forward."

But do you want to know what is equally remarkable about Psalm 85? It talks about peace in really powerful ways. Listen to verses 8 and 10:

The author writes:

I will listen to what the Lord God is saying,
for you speak peace to your faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to you.

And again, verse 10:

Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together,

Listen to this and notice the imagery:

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other. That kind of reminds me of the way the soldiers met on the battlefield and the story of the Christmas Truce; there, righteousness and peace, in the midst of a horrific, unimaginable conflict, kissed each other in No Man's Land. That is why I refer to this incident as a miracle.

We think walking on water, or raising Lazarus from the dead, are Jesus's greatest miracles; but I submit that *peace* and *salvation* are much greater, especially given our nature as human beings, and with it our inclination toward conflict, estrangement and brokenness.

Of course, we hear a lot about peace throughout scripture. Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians says, "Live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you." Again, Jesus, now in the Gospel of John says to His disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you." And again, Paul says, in his letter to the Philippians "May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Now, I could go on; there are hundreds of references to peace, and I may do that next Sunday. But for now, I'm going to spare you and I'll just say this, the word "peace" occurs nearly (I'm kidding, by the way, about next Sunday), the word "peace" occurs nearly 100 times more than "war" across both Testaments.

We are called to be a people of peace, to follow the Prince of Peace, who was born in the place of peace, Jesus Christ, and Bethlehem, respectively.

Yet think how peace seems to be in such short supply in our world today, right? Think about how the fighting continues in the Ukraine, and how civil war continues in the Sudan. Think about how gangs roam the streets of Haiti and dominate the landscape in the absence of a formal government. And think about Bethlehem, a place where peace was born, and yet where now Israeli bombs fall like stars in the book of Revelation, given Bethlehem's location, which is in Palestine, on the Gaza Strip.

All of these things raise a question that I presume many of us are asking. And that's this: As people of God called to be peacemakers, what can we do? What can we do?

Well, I'd like to offer four preliminary options to you as fellow peacemakers. I would welcome additions to my list, hearing them after the service. The first thing I would suggest, and this is not surprising, is that we pray. We pray for a miracle in the Middle East, like there was a miracle in the Christmas Truce of the First World War.

That doesn't simply mean we include Palestine and Israel in our Sunday prayers, although that's good too. It means we pray *from the heart* for peace. We pray from the depths of our being for peace.

Quick story: When 911 happened, I remember I was in graduate school. And I remember I had three courses that day, and the first two professors said not a word. It was stunning. A third professor in the last class, a physicist and theologian, prayed for the people who had been killed and for the families and those who have suffered. And when I joined in his prayer, I did so not from here, but from the depth of my being.

Perhaps some of you have had a prayers like that as well. The Apostle Paul puts it in these terms. "We pray on behalf of the Spirit with sighs too deep for words." Pray with your heart for peace.

And some of you may be asking, "Why should I pray? That's not going to change anything." Indeed, theologians for centuries have debated as to whether prayer can or cannot change God's mind. I don't know what the answer is to that. But I do know that prayer can change *us*. I do know that prayer can make us better people. The more we pray, the more we become people of peace; the more we remain aware of those across the world and in our community in need. So that's the first thing: we pray for peace.

The second thing we do as peacemakers is to support whatever fragile efforts at diplomacy and ceasefire are underway. Let your desires be known as peacemakers to your state representatives and senators.

The third thing we do is we find ways to support whatever humanitarian events or efforts are occurring. Lutheran World Relief, for example, is accepting donations that go to Palestinian *and* Israeli civilians caught in danger. I looked that up last night as I was putting together this sermon, and I thought to myself, "If I am to escape the charge of hypocrisy, and if I am truly a person of peace, then my money too will go to

this organization." You may, as well, wish to donate to LWR or other charities that are trying to bring humanitarian relief to the war-torn Middle East.

Fourth, and finally, we refuse to see the conflict like the one in the Middle East in black-and-white terms. We educate ourselves, as many of you did by attending our November forums. Why? Because black-and-white thinking, as my good friend Beatrice Lawrence, who is Jewish, will tell you, reinforces the already rampant anti-Semitism in this country. Simply blaming the Israelis as the bad guys and seeing the Palestinians as the good guys doesn't do justice to the ambiguities of the conflict. It doesn't account for the fact that the majority of Israelis are *against* what's happening right now. It doesn't account for the fact that many American Jews are against what's happening right now. Instead, it labels, it dichotomizes, and it demonizes.

So there you have it, four things we can do. Pray; reach out to those who represent us in government; educate ourselves; and support humanitarian efforts for peace.

"Okay," you say, "that's great. I got a list. I can put that up on the refrigerator. But why should I do any of these things? Why should I care?"

Well, I think the answer is simple. Because God, that is, your God and mine, as evident in the Christmas Truce of 1914, has done this before. God has done this before. That gives us a basis for why we hope, and for why we do what we can to contribute to "Christmas Truces" as they may occur across the world. Let us pray accordingly this second Sunday of Advent, this Sunday of peace, that God brings it about again. "For ours is a God of peace and love," as Paul says.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard all our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, the Prince of Peace and the bearer of good news.

Amen.