

THE ADVENT OF PEACE

(12/04/11)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Mark 4:35-41

John 14:25-27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Today, the second Sunday in Advent, Nancy, Patrick and Jonanthan Mantos lit the second of our Advent candles, the candle of peace. Chris would have been with us but he is home recuperating from back surgery. Our prayers are with him.

As we noted last week, Christmas is a time of hope. It is a time when we look forward with not only expectancy but also longing to a favorable state of affairs that will hopefully come to pass *under God's direction*. We also need to distinguish true hope from egocentric wishes. We need to distinguish that which we would like to happen from what *God* would like to happen. If our hopes are congruent with God's, then God will be working with us and within us to bring a certain state of affairs to pass. We then become the means through which the kingdom of God becomes incarnate on the earth.

When we think of hope this way, it seems to me that there is no hope that is as congruent with God's hope, God's will, God's vision for the world and for us as the advent or coming of peace. When we not only *pray* for peace but also *work* for peace, we know that we are doing the will of God.

As we were reminded during the lighting of the Advent candle this morning, Jesus came into the world to bring peace. He was called “The Prince of Peace.” He came to help us experience peace within ourselves and to spread the light of God's peace throughout the world. We hope that through our relationship with Jesus, we will come to experience “the peace that passes all understanding.”

The word “peace” is used in several different ways in our Bible. The first meaning has to do with peace on earth, a state of affairs when nation will not be warring against nation, when, according to Isaiah, our swords and spears will be melted down and beaten into plow shares.

This is the dream or hope of Christmas, that we will experience “peace on earth, good will to men.” However, there has never been a Christmas when the world was blessed with peace. Nations were at war with each other when Jesus was born. Two

thousand years later, we have still not found the elusive peace that we seek, the peace that is symbolized in the lighting of the second Advent candle.

How can we attain or at least work toward peace on earth? One of the ways we can do this is to think about how we define ourselves, whether our definition is too narrow. John Lennon, in his song *Imagine*, invites us to change the way we think about the world. Just imagine, if there were no national boundaries, how could we go to war with another nation? If there were no clearly demarcated boundary between Canada and us, how could we go to war with Canada? In fact, what would “us” even mean? What would “Canada” even mean?

I know the notion of erasing national boundaries on a map and on the ground is probably unrealistic, but I think the idea is interesting. If we were to view the world from a vantage point far off in space, we would not see any boundaries. We would have a sense of one earth, of a lot of people inhabiting this little sphere in the midst of an immense universe. This hypothetical state of affairs was articulated in the song *From a Distance*, when the singer asks us to view our world as God might view it.

If, as Jesus taught us, we could see all people as our brothers and sisters, all people as children of God, it would go a long way toward dissolving the boundaries that first define us and then divide us. We would have the sense that we are all in this together. This would not only lead to less war, it would give rise to more sharing of resources. You probably think this is unrealistic, but the way we are doing it is not working. In the past century, over one hundred million people, one hundred million of our brothers and sisters, one hundred million incarnations of God died as a direct result of war. So quite obviously the way we are attempting to resolve our interpersonal and international conflict is not working.

Although I pray for peace around the world, I confess that at times I feel quite discouraged about the possibility of bringing this state of affairs to pass. However, we need to remember that when we pray for peace, when we try to understand and have compassion for our enemies, when we cast our vote for candidates who seem to share our vision, we take courage in noting that it is not just our hope, not just our vision. Our hope is also God’s deepest wish for humanity. We must continue to work for

peace and justice not only in our country but also around the world in every way we can.

A second meaning of peace is contained in the Hebrew word *shalom*. *Shalom* describes a psychological or spiritual state of wholeness or wellbeing. It was used in both religious and secular contexts as a greeting and as a farewell. When our Jewish brothers and sisters greet someone or depart from them, they wish that person peace.

The word *shalom* leads us to realize that peace does not only refer to living together in harmony; it also has to do with us living in harmony within ourselves. When we say we feel at peace, we basically mean that we are in a state where our mind is free from annoyance, distraction, and anxiety. We experience tranquility or serenity. When, during Advent we pray for the advent of peace, we give voice to our longing for peace not only among the nations but also within ourselves.

The Greek word for peace in the New Testament embraces both of these two meanings: the absence of war or interpersonal conflict, and the more intrapsychic or spiritual dimension of *shalom*. However, it also takes on a new, specifically Christian connotation. Jesus uses it to indicate a spiritual quality or power that we possess. When Jesus commissions his disciples to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:13), he tells them,

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

Jesus implies that we can direct or let our peace come upon a house. This implies that our peace is something we can give, withhold, or even retract. I picture it a kind of spiritual energy that flows outward from the disciples.

Perhaps we could try this in the coming week. When you are talking with or listening to someone, try to visualize an energy field of peace flowing out from you, perhaps emanating from your heart, into the person. I suspect that in order to bless a person in this way, we would have to be physically and emotionally present to the

person. I also suspect that we would need to actually experience and incarnate peace in our own lives so that we have something to give.

Jesus tells us that if we have peace in us, we will be able to work miracles. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is crossing the sea with his disciples. When (or because) he falls asleep, a storm suddenly arises. His disciples, in fear, awaken him, concerned that they will perish. Jesus “woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.” (Mark 4:39)

We may not be able to still a storm at sea, but that is not important. It is much more important that we still the storms within ourselves. If we can awaken Jesus, or if we can awaken to Jesus’ presence within us, we may be able to bring peace to our anxious and troubled lives and to our anxious and troubled relationships.

Finally, Jesus takes this understanding of peace even a little further. He connects it with the experience of healing. In the fifth chapter of Mark we find the record of the woman who was healed by touching Jesus’ cloak. As she touches him, Jesus realizes that “his power had gone forth from him.” Perhaps this was his peace. When he finds the woman who touched his garment. Jesus says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:34)

When we turn to Jesus in faith, we open our hearts to the peace that he would impart to us. The peace that comes through our relationship with Jesus can bring us physical and emotional healing. This implies that the absence of inner peace may be a contributing factor to our illness or distress. If we “go in peace,” both we and those with whom we are in relationship may be healed of our dis-ease.

Paul tells us that peace is a gift from God. In many of Paul’s letters, he begins with a blessing of peace. Romans 1:7 reads, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul tells us that peace, like love, is a characteristic of God. It is a part of God’s nature. He also tells us in order for us to experience the

peace and love that God would bestow upon us, our hearts and our minds must be open enough to receive it.

How can we find the “peace that passes all understanding, the peace that is symbolized in our Advent candle? Our Advent candle would suggest that it is inextricably tied to hope, love, joy, and Christ.

Remember, true spiritual hope is not a hope that our lives will be free of strife. It is an expression of trust that, if we carry our burdens properly God will work for healing within us. It is the trust, the belief, and the knowledge that God works for good in those who have faith. In this sense, peace is not only the beginning of the process but the end, an end that becomes an integral part of many new beginnings.

We cannot be at peace; we should not be at peace when injustice reigns upon the earth. Peace must always be tied to justice, or it is not the peace of God. We need to think about the ways that we are not just in our treatment of other people, especially of people who belong to some minority group or simply people who are different from us. This is because we know that if we are ever to experience peace on earth, it has to begin with us. If we cannot find a way to be at peace with ourselves and with those around us, we will not be able to bring a blessing of peace to the world.

Christ would bestow this blessing upon us. He came into the world as a little baby, not a warrior king. He has been hailed as the Prince of Peace. If we let him into our hearts, just as Mary and Joseph opened themselves to him so many years ago, he can grant us the gift of peace, that peace which we need so much. As Jesus told us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

May this blessed gift of peace come upon you this Advent season.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
December 4, 2011*