

*The Light of Peace*©

Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:67-79

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*Fourth Sunday in Advent*

Most every Sunday at the end of worship I say the blessing over you:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

What is peace to you? What would it look like if we had real peace? Can we have peace, really have peace in this world, do you think? Has there ever been peace? I don't think so but today, in so many ways, it seems like peace is so unreachable.

Not only do we have such unrest in the Middle East, in Israel and Palestine, in Afghanistan and Iraq, but we have concerns with Russia and certainly concerns about terrorism – both abroad and here in our own country.

And I have to say, my heart absolutely breaks when I see refugees fleeing from Syria with children who are so afraid; children who have lost parents and family and identity. If I had my own way, I would give each one of them a safe home and lots of love. And most of all, I would love to give them a little peace in this scary, chaotic world.

But setting all that aside, we don't have peace among us here in the United States and it has become worse during and after the presidential election. I have tried to not read or watch anything about it since the election I want so badly to let it go.

The sad thing is the political differences of America today has divided families and caused great conflict there. It has happened in my own family and I am extremely sad when I think of the hateful things my youngest half brother and my sister have said to my own children. Truly hateful. It has caused deep pain.

I know that my family is not the only family to be divided because of the election. Whichever side we are on, how can it possibly be worth the hate and upset, I wonder.

Almost every Sunday, during the pastoral prayer, I ask for peace to be in our world and I ask for us to be channels of that peace. And I admit it, while I'm praying for that, I feel a little skepticism. Like there is a voice inside my head saying, "You know there's no chance that's going to happen." Yet still I pray for peace and trust that in God all things are possible.

In our Scripture passage today, we hear Zechariah's song, declaring that his child who would be named John (John the Baptist. Baptist was middle, or last name). Anyway, John would be a prophet who would prepare the way for salvation; would prepare people's hearts and minds to hear and receive the Savior – Jesus, the Messiah.

He proclaimed that this one who is sent to prepare, would give knowledge of salvation – understanding about forgiveness of sins and the need to repent. He would give light to those

who sit in darkness (as Isaiah said) and who sit in the shadow of death. Zechariah said this son of his would guide our feet into the way of peace.

Okay then. Let's get going on this way of peace. Right? I mean, how many years has it been? And by all our human worldly standards we haven't seen peace yet.

But the truth is, even if we did not have wars and conflict with countries, we do all have inner storms that rage right within ourselves, don't we? Maybe those are the kinds of things Jesus especially came to bring peace to.

Remember when Jesus was in the boat with his disciples? He was tired from teaching so many people who demanded so much from him. They went out into the boat and he went to sleep on a pillow, Mark says, in chapter 4. The King James Version says that a great storm suddenly came upon the sea and the disciples were very afraid. They woke Jesus up, saying, "Master, do you not even care that we perish?"

And Jesus got up and rebuked the wind, saying to the sea, "Peace, be still." And the wind died down and all was calm.

So ... what are the storms that are raging inside of you? I think, as humans, we can't avoid those storms of life. Some may be mild – just those little bits of wind that don't do much damage. They can toss us around a little but we come out at the end still in pretty good shape.

But then there are those storms that can blow us down, that can overwhelm us and scare us so badly that we cry out, "Master, help! Save us! We are perishing here."

What are some of the storms you have experienced in your life over the years? Perhaps it's a financial storm. A crash that put you in a place where you couldn't see the light for the darkness surrounding you.

Or maybe it was the loss of a job, whether or not that was the cause of a financial storm, losing a job is devastating because, not only is it the loss of income but it is also – often – the loss of part of our identity. We are so wrapped up in our work, in what we do and who we are in relationship to our jobs. It's very hard to lose a job, especially one we love; one we've trained for and put ourselves deeply into.

Of course, there are other storms that break our hearts. The loss of someone we love. The death of a child, or a parent, or a spouse. The death of a close friend. The storms of grief can be long lasting and difficult to ride out. It can feel like we are going to drown in it all. We feel like those people that Isaiah talks about – the people who sat in darkness ...

There are storms like a loved one who is suffering from addiction and you love them and want to help them but you also know that you have to be careful not to rescue or enable them. You know, sometimes all you can do is to stand aside, out of love, and let them weather their own storm. They are also sitting in their own darkness – hoping for the light.

We read the Christmas story of Jesus' birth, of the angel visiting the shepherds, announcing that a Savior was born, saying his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means "God with us." And he shall also be called "Jesus" – the one who will save us.

Isaiah says he will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Yet, even this Prince of Peace was not immune to conflict and raging storms around him, from the time of his birth. He had no safe place to be, no warm home to sleep in. There was no room for him anywhere except in a cattle stall with the animals.

He was hated even before he was out of swaddling cloths. In fact, King Herod was so threatened by him that he had every baby boy under the age of two slaughtered, just to be sure he would not grow up to overtake the government. Jesus' parents had to flee to Egypt with him to save his life. So then, he was a homeless refugee for a while.

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” Jesus was born into darkness, but he, himself, was the Light.

Jesus said, in John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Our only hope for peace in this world as it is today, until Jesus returns, is in him. Is in our relationship – our closest walk – with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in trusting him in all of our life, in all our plans, in all our hopes and dreams that we can have peace.

Our hope for peace lies in the knowledge that he has all things under control; that we truly are mortals, who are not in control as much as we like to think we are.

Our true peace is believing that Jesus actually accomplished something very important for us. Because of his life here on earth, and his death on a cross and because of his resurrection from death to life, we have forgiveness for our sins. We have mercy and grace. We have justice. We have no need to fear death – even though we may grieve in our humanity. We have great hope in the promise of our own resurrection.

We also have a strong sense of Jesus' presence – through his Holy Spirit – that really is our great comfort, our sure assurance, and our deepest inner peace.

This Christmas, let us open our hearts to him who offers us peace in the storm. He can and will calm down the winds and give us great peace regardless of the storm we are in. He calls us to be his own reflection of light to those who are hurting and sitting in darkness. He leads us to be his servants as we reach out to those who are suffering and who are in great violent storms.

But for us, our own inner storm can be calmed down and can find peace in every situation because Christ, our Savior was born.

Thanks be to God. Amen!