

Advent 2018: Peace

Preface:

So. We're in the Second Week of Advent, remembering Jesus' first arrival and preparing ourselves to live well until he comes again by reminding ourselves of some basic Christian virtues that are seen in some of those who were central to the Christmas story.

Today, we're talking about peace.

But before we talk about peace, let's pray for it.

Prayer:

Father...

Introduction:

Peace is a tricky thing to talk about, basically because the word means all sorts of things. Are we talking about "internal peace," "global peace," "interpersonal, relational peace?" What does it mean to be "at peace" with ourselves--or with God or others?

And I tend, when this topic comes up, to want to talk about, oh, physical conflict, and war, and what it means to be reconciled to your enemies, and these sorts of things. I tend to feel like there's such an emphasis on that "internal peace," feeling at peace, or peaceful, that I just don't want to give it that much more attention, usually.

But it's what we're going to talk about today, because I think, for a thousand reasons, it's what we should talk about today. We're going to talk about that "sense of peace" that we can have, "inner peace," and what it means as a Christian to live an "inner peaceful" life.

A Commodity:

And "peace," the sort of peace we're talking about today--inner peace, our hearts at rest, the mental whirlwind calming down and the stress melting away as we rest, cool, calm, collected--this sort of peace might be the biggest commodity that's sold by pop-religion and pop-spirituality. I'm sure that I've turned into a dealer now and then, too: "Come to Jesus and feel better." I leave out the "take up your cross" and "resurrection from the dead" and "haunted by the Holy Ghost" bits.

It's an easy sell. Who doesn't want to chill out a little bit. Who doesn't want to be less harried and hurried. After all, everything about the society we're live in demands us to be harried, hurried, and worried. The ideal around us is production and efficiency, and because none of us are perfectly productive and perfectly efficient, it's a problem living in the world we live in. We have all these flaws, like wanting to hang out with people simply for the sake of liking their company, and wanting to laugh and play because it's fun and pleasurable, not because it achieves some

quantifiable ends.

But the pressures of the culture around us, that are as constant and loud as the media that never stops, make the sort of peace we're talking about today an easy sell. Inner peace is marketable, it sells things. Begin to notice what foods, and drinks, and items are marketed with the spoken or unspoken promise that you'll gain peace, somehow, and you'll be shocked and feel manipulated.

So religions promise peace: the absence of worry, the absence of trouble, the absence of stress. Spirituality's big sell is that you can float through life untouched by it's problems. The claims are that you'll be a better person, but what this usually means is that life will be better for you: it will feel less hard, and you'll achieve inner peace, and maybe that'll enable you to be kinder, and gentler, and all these things. But at least you'll have inner peace.

I've had a lot of conversations about this sort of inner-peace with people. And I've mentioned before how Buddhism gets brought up, because of course, when it comes to whatever pop-understanding pop-culture has, it seems as if Buddhism promises inner peace. People just want to "feel zen." And because we have watered down and neglected some of the core truths of what it means to follow Jesus, follow God, we end up in an awkward place, because don't Christianity and

Buddhism—and really, most religions—just promise the same things? Peace and a better life? If you haven't ever had this conversation with people, you will sometime, if you're , if you dare share what you believe at all.

No, not really, right? Buddhism promises inner peace by way of emptying yourself of all desires, all passions. Peace, defined in this way, is the absence of wanting, absence of feeling. It is a side-effect of becoming untouched by the world around you.

Christianity, though, our faith--and more than our faith, but the one we have faith in--promises something different. And this is really good news. Christianity is different from Buddhism, and different from some vague commitment to “being spiritual” in one incredibly important way:

Incredibly Important:

Christianity doesn't say that what you really need to do is achieve inner peace, and offer you a thousand ways to get there. It doesn't say you'll be able to escape the passions and the problems of the world. Jesus tells us instead “In this world you will have trouble.” But we can take heart because Jesus has overcome the world, and he will share his triumph with us even as the world seems to overcome us. We're reminded that if we're going to follow Jesus, “we have to take up our crosses and follow him,” but we know

that the other side of the cross there's resurrection, and we can shout a psalm of faith and trust even as we hang there. Our faith tells us that that we're in slavery, christian or not, it's just a matter of what we're enslaved to: death and all its friends or love and its powers.

Engaged:

When the shepherds in today's announcement went through what they went through—well. Remember it? Let's walk through it, but at a run, really.

The shepherds are doing their shepherd thing, sitting with their sheep, low on the purity totem-pole, low on the list of those everyone thought God would go to, they're out with their sheep. And we read:

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Because: Yes. They should be. We'd all be. This is intense.

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying

in a manger.”

What you want to hear when God—or his messengers—show up is “Don't be afraid.” And they do. And the angels declare Christmas: Good news of great joy. But their claim here isn't just “salvation for their souls,” hope for themselves. They're claiming that God is on his way, has returned to Israel. And God hasn't returned to Israel in isolation. God's coming as the Messiah, the Lord. God's making good on Israel's hopes, but Israel isn't alone in the world: They're occupied by Rome, who keeps their puppet-king in power, someone Jesus' parents will flee to Egypt from in just a few years. What the world will discover is that Jesus is Lord; Caesar, and all other kings, are not.

They're given the sign that God will make good on this; and the sign is the very child who will grow up to embody all these hopes.

And then, surrounding the angel, the “heavenly host” shows up. They declare,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

And we have to understand this for what it is. This “company” of the heavenly host isn't just a group of angels. It's a battalion of God's angelic, spiritual foot-soldiers, who existed, as far as Israel was concerned,

to fight their spiritual unseen enemies. And they hadn't been heard from for a long time. Their affirmation of the angel's news isn't just an affirmation of the rightful Lordship of God. It's also a promise that those who think they are lords over the earth aren't, and peace will only fall to those on whom God's favor rests.

And that group isn't exclusive. It's easy to be a part of, really; the little one in the manger, who is the real Caesar of the world, the real King, will go on to describe all that God desires. Right now, to shepherds of all people, this heavenly battalion is teasing at what they'll later shout in Revelation, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

In this king's birth, a spiritual army is unleashed on the unseens spiritual enemies of God, and judgment is promised on those kings and rulers who reject God's Lordship, and the way of God's favor. This isn't a powerful moment because it makes the shepherds feel good; they probably dropped to the ground at the heavenly hosts' reveal.

This is a cosmic, powerful moment, because God is taking back humanity's rule from those human rulers who have claimed it, and declaring spiritual war on the the spiritual antagonists who stand behind them, whether as partners or puppet-masters.

The shepherds jump up and run to David's town, Bethlehem, and see that the angel wasn't lying. And we'll talk more, soon, about what happens next.

Derivative: Lordship to

Christianity claims that any peace we have internally, any sense of peace we have, begins in this moment, begins with God taking control of creation back from those kings who claimed God-like status, and God-like power, and God-like freedom do with people and the earth whatever profited themselves.

And Christianity claims that the peace that we find in this life, this “inner peace,” our “souls at rest” that we’re talking about today, it doesn’t come from disengaging with the world, but engaging fully with it, sure of the presence of God with us.

Because God engaged the world, overcame the world, reminded the world of his lordship, power, and rights over all creation at Jesus' birth, because God has engaged the world with promises of peace, we engage the world and discover both peace and God among us, as we live.

Our peace derives from God's power; our engagement with the world follows from God's engagement with the world, follows from the Spirit's presence with those who trusted this announced King, and follows from the

promise that the way the world works, which is so antagonistic to peace will come to a final end at Jesus' return. Between the angelic moments of Jesus' birth announcement and the announcement of his return, we do all we can to pursue the favor of God.

And there are blessings to us that follow from this pursuit.

Understandable Peace:

There are hundreds of places where you can find a sense of “peace that is understandable,” right? After a big personal win, with good friends and family, when all your needs are met and there’s money in the bank, and “sunny days are here again,” sure, be at peace. This makes sense. Christianity isn’t just for depressed emo kids; we’re meant to be content and at peace. But: the world will over us all sorts of ways, apart from God, that we can find something like peace, some approximation of it, some settled down spirit, and an easy time. If the only peace we care about in the world is understandable peace, immediate peace on our own terms, the world’s got that pinned down.

But Christianity promises something better: “peace that surpasses all understanding,” peace that makes no sense at all, peace that comes in the middle of the mess, as the mess whirls around us and splatters our faces.

Inner peace might be the biggest commodity that's sold by pop-religion and pop-spirituality. It's an easy sell. It's what is promised, what's sold. Convert and you're anxiety will go away. Do our religious practices and you won't fret anymore about work. But even pop-spirituality can't win against the immediate fake-peace that comes from a high or a buzz, so we have to ask ourselves if we, as Christians, really want to try to sell a product that is not only a deception, but is also just not as good as the oblivion and escapism that the world offers.

Because, again, what Jesus offers us isn't escape, it isn't oblivion, it isn't self-deceiving pollyanna-ism or feeling great all the time, it isn't peace that makes sense given how sweet we've got it going on in this good moment.

What Jesus offers us is, as Paul puts it "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus." It's a guarding peace that comes as we turn to God in prayer and thanksgiving, share our need and our worry and our anxiety, and remember that "the Lord is near"--coming back, and alive in us through the Holy Spirit.

This "peace that surpasses all understanding" is the sense that God's with us, and that's enough, we have "still quiet souls," right in the middle of our troubles.

What we're given is the sure sense in this moment that the horizon of our lives stretches out much farther than this moment, which like most moments of our lives could be an anxious one, could be a worry-filled one, but doesn't have to be if we turn to God with all our needs.

Jesus gives us a mystery that I pray we've all experienced: calm and peace in our souls when it makes no sense to feel calm or peaceful. This is a gift from God, and we simply have to receive it, and position ourselves for it by drawing close to God through faithfulness and prayer. The world offers all sorts of "understandable peace," but that doesn't matter when the bottom falls out from under us. What we need then is the protecting peace of God, and there's only one place we can get it.

Making Peace:

And part of this peace that surpasses all understanding, part of inner peace, is allowing God to make peace inside our souls with the events that define, drive, and delineate us-limit us. God reconciles us with our memories, and redirects the attention of our hearts.

We have done terrible things, out of anger and out of ignorance. We have experienced terror and pain, simply be being in a certain place at a certain time. And it's not true that what doesn't kill us makes us

stronger; what is true is that until we are killed by disease or someone, until death comes, we are faced with an ultimate choice of, on the one hand, letting God take into himself our pain, our terror, all that keeps us from peace, and diffusing it by loving us and clinging to us and giving us a name and an identity and a life, or, on the other hand, letting the terror make its home in us, and slowly hollow us out with rage and pain and sadness.

These are the only two choices. There is no neutral place. Peace is being made in us, or in some metaphorical way, we are being unmade by anger and sadness and regret and disillusionment.

Making Peace: A Great Promise:

God can make peace of all the trouble that we have gone through, and he does it through his great promise of working it out for our good. I keep coming back to this, you know, in my life, in my thoughts, the idea that God can take the bits and pieces, the disconnected troubles, the grief and the terror and the unmet expectations and the pain that comes from living--because no matter how well we insulate ourselves against heartache, it is a rare person who doesn't experience it--and God can make good out of it for us.

You can't escape heartache, or stress, or worry. To be alive is to have our hearts broken and our

expectations unmet and fear surprise us, and only when Jesus returns and sets things right will life, in general, be any other way.

But God is a master craftsman. God is no amateur. All ideas, all wisdom, all capability, all careful planning are God's. And God is able to make us whole when the opposites of peace--fear and anxiety and the fragmentation of our selves that come from it--rise up inside us. Peace may be just the name we give to being a whole person resting in God's love and celebration for us. It's what happens when God makes sense out of our lives and all that's gone in them. He shows us how we can still live, and still experience his love.

Making Peace: Derivative:

That inner peace that we buy and sell? That we want so badly? That we would give anything for, and do: money, time, and energy, crowding our already too-full calendars, and already too-full minds with things we think will bring it. This is a contradiction, of course, like taking poison to be healed, but we do it any way. Yet that inner peace that surpasses all understanding, and makes no sense given the situation at hand only comes from God.

And more than this, it is, in some very real ways, a symptom, a side-effect, of God enabling us to make peace with the course our life has taken, is taking.

Does this make sense? When we realize the peace God gives to us in our souls over what has taken place in our lives, good or bad, we are able, then, to live in the peace of the moment as life continues to move on, sweeping us with it.

We are not passive against the world, acted upon without personal agency or freedom. But we are far from all powerful and self-determining. And insofar as life has its way with us, and we find ourselves in places we never meant to be, and find ourselves carrying burdens we never meant to pick up, we must turn to God and ask God to take our heavy hearts, and lighten them, trading our heavy stony hearts for ones that beat out hope and love and joy and of course, peace, peace that the world cannot overcome.

A Gospel of Peace:

But if it's true that inner peace only comes as God makes us whole, really, helps us to make peace with the fact that this is our life, this is what we we've done and what's been done to us, then it's even more true that all peace we experience, all of this "felt peace" that I've been talking about, it's derivative, too. It follows from the fact that God has made peace, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, between God and all people, and between all people--enemies and friends and frenemies and those we're indifferent to and don't even see.

Paul talks about putting on whatever shoes we need to proclaim the gospel of peace, and of course, it's that gospel of peace--the peace gospel, the fact that God has made peace between us, and himself, and between every sort of person on earth, whether enemies or indifferent--that is itself the root of inner peace that we have. It's what enables us to trust God enough, to realize that he can take our broken pieces, the messes we've made with our lives, and make us whole people, and once whole, we can respond to whatever comes our way with such a trust in our God who makes good that peace that makes no sense will fill our souls.

This is Christianity. Peace in the midst of all troubles. And of course, what pop-culture sells us is true, at least a little bit: when your soul is at rest inside you, you can in fact move a little more quickly. Your feet are fitted with something that enables you to move more freely in the world. You can be a better person, but "better" for a Christian only means "more like Jesus," more faithfully representing him wherever we go and whatever we do, things seen or unseen. We can become the peace-makers we're called to be, or at least, the peace-bearers: people who bear witness to a way of living that doesn't make sense, because we have a peace that doesn't make sense, that surpasses all understanding.

Conclusion:

There is no peace outside the work of God. Peace, whatever kind it is, is a derivative of the fact that God first made a way for people to be in relationship with him without fear, or anger, or strife. We could say so much more: if Christians won't end wars, who will? If Christians won't mediate troubles, then who will? If Christians won't turn to God and say "I am hurried, and harried, and worried, and I need your peace that makes no sense to fill my soul, that I might position others for your gospel of peace to come true in their lives," then we toss out much or most of the present God has given us in Jesus Christ with the wrapping, just send it away. Or maybe leave it unopened,

This topic is too big for one morning. It's as big as our whole lives, and all their mess. We need to lean into the peace of God, the same way we lean into a corner that we take too fast. It's Advent, and we're trying to remind ourselves that Jesus showed up once, and he'll show up again. And that very reminder points out that right now we live in an in-between world, a world that's taken in it's breath and is just about to let it out, and when it does it'll be a shout of joy, a scream like Bo gives when Carolyn reminds her that we're having a party. But until the world exhales at Jesus' return, the peace of God, which is a bonus to us, a present, is something we should take a moment to receive.

Self-questioning:

Of course, we need to ask ourselves this great

question: Do we trust God? Do we believe in his kindness? In the making good work that He can do? Have we offered to him the raw material of our whole lives, for him to redeem, and make from us, whole people, at peace with who we are and where we've been? Are we ready at any moment to take the peace he offers up, and lay down the anxiety, worry, disconnection and distraction that this world force feeds us? God won't fail in giving us whatever we need, especially not this.

We may not be able to explain it, it may surpass our understanding, but I pray that we can experience it over and over until Jesus returns.