

Advent 2: Christ's Gifts that Turn our World Right-side Up
#2: Peace in the Midst of Turmoil
Philippians 4:6-9 and Luke 2:3-14 (NRSV)
By John Gill

We hear it over and over during the holidays: in carols sung and scriptures read in church; on Christmas cards and lapel pins and brightly colored t-shirts and sweatshirts; even sandwiched between the plastic Santas and snowmen on the festively decorated lawns of homes and businesses, schools and town halls all across America – the echo of the angel that first Christmas night who sang to those frightened shepherds of “Peace on earth.”

Peace. This morning, we have lit the Candle of Peace on our Advent Wreath, as we continue our series of sermons on “Christ's Gifts that Turn our World Right-side Up.” This morning, how the coming of Jesus gives us “Peace in the Midst of Turmoil.” And, with the year we have all just lived through, we all could use a little “peace” about now!

The Bible is fixated on the concept of peace. It's one of those words that keeps popping up as we read along. In the Old Testament, the prophets longed for peace and wrote of a day when all wars would cease – when nations would not lift up sword against nation – when we would finally beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks – a time when we would “study war no more.”

Jesus was fixated on peace, as well. He came as the “Prince of Peace,” and taught his followers that we should be peacemakers who turn the other cheek and do good to all who do us wrong. In the end, as he was departing this life, he gave, as his parting gift, a word of “peace:” Listen how John reports it in his Gospel: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

Then we shouldn't be surprised that those who wrote the rest of the New Testament were also obsessed with peace. “Grace and peace to you” was the standard greeting of the first Christians, and the words function as something of an ostinato-drumbeat all throughout the letters of Paul and other writings in the New Testament.

And like a crescendo that reaches its climax in the finale of a great work of music, in the closing chapters of Revelation, John shares with us his vision of the “Peace” to come when Christ returns in victory, and the prophetic words of the Christmas angel finally come to pass: “Peace on earth, goodwill to all people.”

It's no wonder, then, that you and I are so enamored with the notion of peace. A longing for peace seems to be hot-wired into our very being – like the impulse to breathe, and eat, and find a mate. We ache for peace. But peace eludes us – like the proverbial brass-ring we strain for, but just can't seem to grasp – peace always seems to be just out of our reach.

That's why, if we're honest, we may be a little bit perturbed by the song of the Christmas angels. In light of the reality of our world – especially the world which we see when we look around us during this Advent, and the discordant emotions we harbor in our own souls – the angel's chorus sounds dissonant and out of place.

And this year, perhaps more than most years, the words of the angels don't sound like “good news of great joy.” They sound like a cruel joke.

During this season, as we sing of the coming of a “Prince of Peace” who was born to usher in a new age of “Peace on Earth,” it’s as if we had suddenly forgotten that the world in which we live is anything but peaceful.

Our nation, and our world, are in turmoil. And, for many of us, our lives are also in turmoil.

Let’s be realistic. There is no “peace on earth.” And there never has been.

We might as well be brutally honest this morning: We ALL may be just a bit uncomfortable with this song of the angels. Deep in our hearts, we question whether the angel wasn’t just playing a sadistic prank on the shepherds – tantalizing them to hope for something that could never be.

Let’s just say out-loud what we are all thinking: Is the hope for peace just a pipe-dream – simply a utopian delusion? Were the angels that night guilty of what the prophet, Jeremiah, wrote about the false prophets of his day: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer. 6:14) How can we understand this promise of the angels in such a messed up world as this?

You know, this Advent and Christmas season, I’ve been struggling with trying to make sense of the discontinuity between what we profess to believe about peace, and the reality of the world in which we live. And I’ve come to the conclusion that the problem is NOT with the message of the angels. The problem is with our understanding of “Peace.”

If you were to go out on the street or to the mall and stop people randomly and ask them to define “peace,” most would say that peace is “the absence of war or violence.” And, of course, it does mean that. But I’ve come to believe that this is not what the angels meant by peace – or at least, not the only thing they meant. I believe that, when the Bible talks of peace, it implies much more than that.

All we have to do is look to Jesus to see this. When the “Prince of Peace” came into the world, he didn’t set out to change the WORLD – his mission was to change US – to change our HEARTS! Jesus himself makes this distinction clear: As I mentioned before, Jesus told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” But then, he clarified what he meant when he continued: “Not as the world gives do I give to you.”

You see, this “peace on earth” – this “peace” given by Jesus – that turns our world “right-side up,” is not merely the absence of conflict and trouble, but a peace that transcends conflict and trouble!

Just think about Jesus, himself: He was the very “Prince of Peace;” he knew peace in his soul more than any person who ever has lived. But, his life was anything but peaceful, and ended violently, on a bloody cross. And just consider the lives of the Apostles and those early followers of Jesus. Their lives weren’t a “cake-walk,” either. Paul, you’ll remember, was persecuted, imprisoned, shipwrecked, whipped, stoned, and finally beheaded. Stephen was stoned to death. Peter was crucified upside down on a cross.

But the Apostles are all remembered because of the peace that transcended their circumstances. And it’s been so all down through the centuries.

Now, if the “superstars of the faith” had to endure terrible hardship and troubles – if they had to live out their faith in a world torn-apart by wars, and hatred, and violence – why should we expect that our lives should be any different?

You see, Jesus didn’t come simply to set up a “utopia” devoid of conflict. He came to give us HIS peace, so that we can be victorious in the midst of the conflicts of life that are inevitably going to come our way. He came to give us a “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) - peace that only comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

This month marks the 18th anniversary of my father’s passing. It was a blessing to be able to be with my father during his final days. As I watched him prepare for his dying, I gained a much clearer understanding of what the Bible means when it speaks of “peace.”

My father was a man of faith, who had no fear of death. In fact, we were all struck by the peace with which he approached the inevitability of his passing. He kept assuring us that he was not afraid to die – that everything was “wonderful,” – that he had no regrets.

He told us time-and-time-again how much he loved us. And he proclaimed over-and-over to everyone who came to the house to visit: “I have the best of two worlds.” We were never sure exactly what he meant by that, but I like to believe he was speaking of his earthly and his heavenly dwellings – the opportunity he had to die at home surrounded by his earthly loved ones, and the promise of being united in heaven with his loved ones who had already made that journey into eternity.

Dad’s life was a good life. But in his final two years, he had to endure many trials and tribulations as he suffered with terminal cancer. He would have had every reason to be bitter and angry at God – but he never was. God had given him a “peace that passes understanding” – a sure and certain confidence in the promise of eternal life, so that he could live his final days in remarkable peace and assurance.

As I was reflecting on my dad’s death and trying to understand the source of his peace – the source of peace for any of us – I came across Isaiah 26:3-4: “Those of steadfast mind, you (O God) keep in peace – in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.”

You see, I believe that THIS is what the angels were trying to tell us that first Christmas night – that if we place our ultimate trust in God – if we lean on the Everlasting Rock – we can know “peace” in our lives, no matter what trials and difficulties we must face. And I believe they were also telling us that, when our world finally takes the message of the angels to heart, it too will at last, know “Peace on Earth.”

So, this is the Good News of the angels’ song this Advent and Christmas season – that even in the midst of a world in conflict, AND a nation in discord; AND in the midst of our lives that may be in turmoil, you and I can have the “peace” of God.

One of my favorite Christian recording artists is Sandi Patti. On one of her Christmas albums she sings a wonderful song called, “Child of Peace.” May it be our prayer for Peace this Advent:

On a night of promise long ago
When a star announced the light of hope
To a world that knew no peace before

The holy "Child of Peace" was born.

In a world where peace eludes us still
Where the heart exerts its will
At a time when words are not enough
O, "Child of Peace," we need your Love.

Child of Comfort – Child of Light
Hope that drives away the night
Touch our lives from heaven above
Oh, "Child of Peace," we need your Love.

Or in the words of the Christmas angels: "For unto you is born this night in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord..." And there were with the angel a multitude of the Heavenly Host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth...

Peace."