



“Life and Light”: Peace and Conflict

Advent 2

12.10.17

Text: Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 2:8-14

Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“shalom”: complete, wholeness, no missing parts, safety, universal flourishing, existence without fear, nothing broken. It describes something complex which has lots of moving parts, each functioning according to design.

“Why do you think it’s so easy to interpret peace as simply the absence of conflict? Do you think that a calm, trouble-free existence is realistic goal for your life?”

“If you only knew, this day, what would make for peace...” Luke 19:42

By definition, shalom has an ethical quality to it, meaning that it impacts our relationships in recognizable ways.

“Do you think it’s true that, sometimes, God can’t provide the promised peace because the resources we are utilizing don’t make for peace? What are some of the strategies for peace that we utilize with actually result in further relational chaos?”

“Blessed are the peacemakers...” (Matthew 5:9).

“What do you think the difference is between being a peace-keeper and a peace-maker?”

“Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.” Romans 5:1

“Given the profound nature of peace offered toward us in the Advent of Christ, at what point are we willing to consider any relationship ‘irreconcilable’? Would you be willing to interrupt the cycle of revenge or resentment by moving toward another in reconciling ways, if it would make for peace?”

“Consider praying through the statements below with a pastor, friend or family member. How might admitting the presence of one these bring your heart peace?”

- Indifference—ignoring or being numb to conflict
 - Compromise—discarding truth at the expense of Peace
 - Secrets—hiding personal failures, while publicly presenting success.
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Teaching Notes...

Most of us are in the “ideal” place for Advent, but we don’t realize it.

It can be tempting to think that because we are encountering significant struggles during this season that we can’t enter Advent without an ‘attitude adjustment’, or without making ourselves ‘more presentable’ to God.

But, Advent is about letting God come to us, and the whole mystery of our faith is that God is not reluctant to come in unexpected ways and into seemingly undesirable circumstances, in order to continue to move all of creation toward the wholeness/goodness for which it was created.

Hope is not our mental ‘happy-place’. It’s not the virtual reality that we create for ourselves which allows us to escape the painful truths of our broken world. In fact, I would argue that your “happy demeanor” --- absent of an honest expression of dissatisfaction--- is actually counter-productive. It fails to name the brokenness and disappointment and allow us to properly gauge our response.

Hope describes “how” we wait. Peace describes “that for which we are waiting.”

In the biblical tradition the vision for how things ought to be is called *shalom* (Hebrew). We translate this word as “peace”.

“*shalom*”: complete, wholeness, no missing parts, safety, universal flourishing, existence without fear, nothing broken. It describes something complex which has lots of moving parts, each functioning according to design. *Everything as it ought to be*, assumes that, everything is *not* as it ought to be (“evil”).

Peace is not just some Hallmark sentimentality, or temporary moratorium on humans behaving badly. It is orderly lifestyles, personal and interpersonal functionality, all which reflect our recognition of, and response to, God.

It’s really easy to confuse peace with tranquility.

We associate peace with our desire for a calm, quiet existence, but we realize, in this posture, how fragile--- how uninformed--- such an anticipation really is.

Peace is best described, not by what is absent, but by what is present.

It’s best understood, not by what it avoids, but by what it offers. We can rightfully say that peace is about the *absence* of conflict but, more importantly, it’s about the *presence* of wholesome relationships. It’s not just that we have finally stopped all the yelling, but now we don’t say anything at all. We’re in the same beds, but with our backs to one another.

Isaiah was a prophet, which I assume from many of the texts, was not an easy gig sometimes. No one really seemed to aspire to the role. In fact, when “called”, everyone seemed resistant.

There were, likely, very few lined up at the “Prophet’s Booth” on *Career Day* at Jerusalem High. I’m assuming that they received very few “likes” on their FB posts because they were typically making their appeals to a people who were either not yet convinced that the picture was quite as dismal as the prophets were painting it, or resigned to the less-than-favorable conditions.

So, God becomes like the parent watching the child, completely oblivious and enamored, chasing the ball toward the street. In all of their self-directed movement, there were both warnings and promises. A clear and pervasive call to “return”.

Isaiah is not simply an indifferent “mouth-piece”, but one who had been taken into the ‘counsel of God’, and was being asked to deliver both the message of God and the ‘pathos’ (passion/heart) of God.

Isaiah’s name means, “*God is salvation*”. Every time he is introduced at a dinner party, or his name is called in the doctor’s office, the gospel is announced. His name become synonymous with the wholeness and functionality that God is determined to establish in his good world.

Isaiah’s way offering a sign of promise? The **stump**. Assyria had essentially ‘clear-cut’ this grand and majestic forest of trees (his people) which were “*the Lord’s planting*” (Isaiah 61).

Stumps are the harsh reminder of what ‘used to be’.

An opportunity squandered. The seemingly lifeless remnants of a marriage that once seemed so fulfilling. A career that once seemed so promising. A friendship that has ended in betrayal.

Perhaps you have sat on that stump before?

Isaiah’s prophecy reminds us that peace always seems to “*push through*” the most challenging of circumstances; through the hardest places in our hearts... like blades of grass through the asphalt.

“Be aware that what often looks like death has life in it, just waiting to be birthed”.

“Peace on earth” and “glory to God in the highest” are inseparable companions.

Notice the (3) concepts offered in parallelism.

glory---- in heaven---- to God

peace---- on earth--- to humans whom God favors

It says that peace is not the product of earth. The wholeness we desire does not result from social or political reform, or better educational opportunities, or a stern commitment to re-inventing ourselves. It has its origins, in the heavens. Peace is only and ever God-initiated; it is “grace”.

“*on earth, peace among those whom he favors...*” scholars agree that this is the most accurate translation.

That’s different theology than, “*on earth, peace and goodwill to men*”.

This qualification raises an issue for us. Luke has already announced that the peace is available for ‘*all people*’ (2:10), but only experienced by those who let God love them. Who will accept grace.

Who does God favor? Peace is connected to glory: what we value, what we are trusting, how we are assessing God, ourselves, and others and the lifestyle/choices that result.

God is pleased when...

...we are actively pursuing him. That kind of search, Hebrews says, will always be rewarded with presence (Hebrews 11:6).

... we so delight in our relationship with him that we actually find ourselves contemplating ways to bring him pleasure (Romans 8:6-8).

... our growing trust in him is producing loving- obedience (John 8:29, 'always do what pleases him')

Often, having peace has less to do with the absence of conflict around us, and more to do with the presence of turmoil within us.

Sometimes, God can't provide the promised peace because the present resources we are utilizing don't make for peace (e.g. the (70) hour work-week, the "social drink" that turns into private alcoholism, binge buying on Amazon). Some of our strategies for peace simply resulting in further chaos.

Peace is always a consequence. It's the life you realize as a result of loving well.

Shalom is always a by-product of love. Love always produces justice and justice creates the conditions of peace (e.g. a peaceful relationship is not the objective in marriage. Loving one another well is).

Peace is not just an announcement or declaration, it's an invitation.

If God is the bringer of peace, it's our role to be makers of peace (Matthew 5:9). It's up to us to be transformed into the kind of people who not only expect things to get better, but who are actually helping to make things better.

"By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us - set us right with him, make us fit for him - we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us". Romans 5:1 (Message)

Many of us now recognize this "shoot" (Isaiah 53:2) which has become a life-giving vine. We attach the name, "Jesus", and the title, "the Christ", to him.

Jesus is the only one perfectly suited for the role of Messiah because he responds, not from the posture of a disgusted and distanced deity, but as "God with us" ... "God for us" [Matthew 1:23; Romans 8:31].

It means that Jesus not only knows what it means to be God, but what it means to be human. Isaiah said he was a, "*man of sorrows*". That he was, "*familiar with suffering*". That he would be the one who would, "*suffer the consequences of sin so that we could be whole*" (Isaiah 53).