

War and the Prince of Peace

Isaiah 9:2-7

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The year was 1862. The Civil War was raging. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was grieving the death of his second wife when news came that his son had been gravely wounded in the war. That was when Longfellow sat down and wrote this poem:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old familiar
carols play*

*And wild and sweet the words repeat, of peace on
earth good will to all*

*And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on
earth I said*

For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will to all.

In a matter of nine days now, you and I will officially celebrate the first Christmas of the 21st century. Like every century before in recorded history, we will welcome the Prince of Peace into a world at war. On this Advent Sunday, when we proclaim peace once more, I wonder—How will we keep from despair? I'd like to talk about that a few moments this morning.

PEACE IS AN INSIDE JOB.

To terror stricken, grief ridden disciples Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives give I to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." The war that defeats many of us is the war that is going on inside of us. There are battlefields of our own making. Not all prisoners of hate have come home. The "I" has yet learned to live with the "me" and the result of that conflict is devastating down in the depths of our very being. Enrico Caruso, the great Italian tenor, named his internal conflict, Big Me and Little Me. People say that before a concert, you could often hear him in the wings saying, "Get out Little Me, Big Me take over." All of us with integrity and insight have known and experienced that struggle in our souls.

Williams James, nearly a century ago, said Conversion is the process by which the divided self becomes unified. "I" and "Me" must learn to live with one another for "Us" to have peace.

May I suggest a few paths to peace for you this Christmas? I could name a dozen but let me settle for three.

One, why not make peace with your imperfections? The perfect meal, the perfect party, the perfect gift, and if you are on the staff, the perfect worship service, will not happen this Christmas. They will be our best and they will be good and in

some cases, they will even be great, but they will not be perfect, because they will be done by imperfect people delivered and participated in by imperfect persons. Let all of us who are perfectionists just “get over it,” so we can have Christmas.

In the second place, we need to remember that when we die, our “in” baskets will not be empty and our “to do” list will not be completed. Since that is a fact of life, why on earth are you trying to get everything done before December 25th? RELAX. It will do you good.

Third, find some time to walk upon the midnight clear and see the silent stars go by, so when the angels sing of peace on earth you will be present to hear it.

Helen Steiner Rice wrote a long time ago:

*When I am troubled and lost in deep despair
I bundle all my troubles up and go to God in prayer.
I tell him I am heartsick, and lost and lonely too
I tell him I am deeply burdened and I don't know
what to do.
But I know he stilled the tempest, calmed the angry sea.
And I humbly ask if in his love, he'll do the same for me.
Then I just keep quiet, and think on thoughts of peace.
And as I abide in stillness, my restless murmurings cease.*

Peace is an inside job.

PEACE IS A RELATIONAL ESSENTIAL. Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, *So far as it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Peace-making begins at home. Barbara Bush said several years ago in a commencement address that what happens in the White House is not as important as what happens in your house.

He was abused as a child. For the least little offense, actual or imagined, his father would beat him. He did not even call his own son by name. Instead, he whistled for him like a dog when he wanted him. Feelings of hatred, though never expressed, deepened into rage. As a young adult, the boy discovered that his father had Jewish ancestors. In his twisted mind he came to blame his father's behavior on his Jewish blood. You know his name. It was Adolf Hitler.

I wonder, would the healing of a small boy's wound have prevented the Holocaust? What is even more important for us is would the healing of some child's wound today prevent an act of terrorism or shooting spree on some tomorrow?

I implore you, my friends, teach peace at your house today. I know it is not easy,

is it? It is Saturday morning and you are now in the yard trying to find some peace for yourself from the pressures of work when suddenly five year old Billy and three year old Susie declare World WAR III in the garage over the Big Wheel. Billy is sitting on it, saying, "I'm going to ride it," and Susie is standing at the wheel and is not going to budge an inch. The yelling disturbs your peace and you are confronted with the question. What are you going to do? Are you going to ignore it until they get into a fist fight? Are you going to yell at your wife and say, "Why didn't you keep the kids in the house?" Are you going to grab that Big Wheel in anger throw it in the corner and saying, "Until you learn to behave yourselves, you are not going to ride it"? Are you going to become a peacemaker? Are you going to walk up to those kids and say, "It doesn't seem like you all are having a lot of fun, does it? Got any suggestions on how we might work this out?" You have been there; you have done it. You know the long silence that comes afterward and finally Billy says, "Well, I guess we could take turns." And Susie says, "Well, if we just take ten minutes at a time, maybe we could." If you can figure out which one is going to ride first, then you have become a peacemaker in your family.

It is not easy; it is just essential. You see, the crabby little girls of today become the crabby old women of tomorrow. The controlling little boys of today become the controlling men of tomorrow. What we are talking about is essential stuff. In the routines of life, peace is a relationship essential.

PEACE IS A WORLD-WIDE CONCERN.

In a war-torn part of the world that continues in intense conflict today, the prophet Isaiah painted a picture of nations transforming their swords into gardening tools and deciding to study war no more. What is Isaiah's dream? Is it just a pipe dream of an old preacher or has he captured in some way the human hunger of the heart? Why is it that we humans hunger so deeply for peace and at the same time find ourselves killing one another, to the end that 3,640,000,000 people have died in combat since recorded time?

Stanley Hauerwas, Duke University, says that the world needs war so people who pursue their own self-interest will be mobilized at times to die for a good cause. War makes people stop looking at themselves and identify with a whole society. I have a lot of respect for Stanley Hauerwas, but I disagree on that point. Can we find a higher motivation for self-sacrifice? Furthermore, what is this lingering hunger for peace? A hunger that caused Dwight David Eisenhower to say during his presidency, "I think people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it." Peace, we want it, we long for it.

Historically, people have held one of three religious beliefs about war. I entitled this sermon, "War and the Prince of Peace." So, let me get to the point.

War for some people is a divinely inspired CRUSADE. They are called by God to

kill people. Christians led those crusades in the 11th and 12th century in an attempt to establish Christian rule in the Holy Land. Today, a Jihad, a Holy War, has been declared against the United States of America. We are not engaged in a clash of superpowers, but a clash of culture. It is our materialistic, corrupt, decadent, immoral way of life, which we impose on the rest of the world for economic purposes, that Osama bin Laden wants to destroy. If we want to win the war against terrorism, we had better understand the kind of war we are in. A Holy War has been declared against us.

For others, though essential, evil is a way to justice. We call it the Just War Theory. I suggest most of us in this room would land somewhere in this category today. People who believe in Just Wars go to war when there is a Just Cause and a Just Intent, as a response to some sort of serious evil. Such wars are waged for the purpose of restoring peace with justice, and are usually waged as a last resort when a reasonable answer cannot be found otherwise. Most Americans think that our war against terrorism is a Just War. I just pray that our “just war” never becomes a crusade.

Of course, some among us have always been Pacifists. They have witnessed to us about the strong opposition to killing. They are Conscientious Objectors to any military service.

Justin Martyr said in the 2nd century, “Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise of peace.” So, Christians in every part of the world should convert their weapons of war into tools of peace.

St. Francis, whose prayer we prayed to open the service of worship today, volunteered in the Crusades. He found himself in the midst of combat, but he refused to fight and was captured by the enemy. They were so taken by his peacefulness that they gave him back to the Christians.

Peace churches have always had a witness among us-- the Mennonites, the Church of Brethren, the Quakers to name a few. I don’t know how to reconcile the Prince of Peace with a world at war, but I do know that Isaiah’s vision of peace will never come with swords loud clashing nor the roll of stirring drums. It is with deeds of love and mercy that the heavenly kingdom finally comes. It is with that in mind that I suggest that there is a fourth view to peace.

PEACE IS A SPIRITUAL VISION.

The wolf will lie down with a lamb. The bear and the child will play together. You heard it beautifully sung this morning by this wonderful choir. *A little child shall lead them.* What is this vision of Isaiah in which all of creation and all the kingdoms of the universe finally are reconciled one to another on the mountain of the Lord?

You can go to Disney’s Animal Kingdom Park with its 14 story, Tree of Life, where

325 animals live peaceably together, but that is Disney World and it is make-believe. In Isaiah's vision, it's not make-believe, it's SHALOM. Shalom is more than the absence of conflict, shalom is harmony, wholeness, health, and well-being for the whole universe. Not just for some of it, but for all of it. Not just here, but everywhere, in every kingdom.

Isaiah says, *...a little child shall lead them*. Christians believe that he was trying to tell us about the coming of Christ. The Prince of Peace will come as a helpless baby to teach us how to live in peace. When the angels proclaim his birth, they announce "Peace on earth". When He begins His ministry, He says, *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God*. When the heat is on and it gets tough and conflict gets deep, He said, *love your enemies*. When He heads to the cross He weeps over Jerusalem because they do not know the *things that make for peace*.

When St. Paul tried to develop a theology of Christendom in the New Testament, he proclaims, Christ is our Peace for He has broken down the walls of hostility that separate us one from another.

So, I pray that we find peace today. I am absolutely certain that the peace we hope for will not be found by bombs bursting in the air, but from a Baby born long, long ago.

So it is, that Longfellow did not end his poem in despair. He wrote another verse:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With Peace on Earth, good will to all.*

May The Prince of Peace abide with you this Christmas! Amen.

