

“What Will Jesus Find? Peace”

Reading: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46-55

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The Christmas story in the gospel of Luke tells of a host of angels who told some sleepy shepherds near Bethlehem about the birth of the Messiah, and they sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.” So we picture a peaceful scene, a pastoral scene, a silent night, and peace must mean that things are quiet and calm and serene. Christmas peace maybe looks like twinkling lights and a steaming mug of hot chocolate and a crackling fire in the fireplace. But what is peace? Are peace and peacefulness the same thing?

The Romans had a saying: “If you want peace, prepare for war.” We’re really not so much different in our society today. The world apart from Christ has usually had some variation of that definition of peace. Peace, in the world’s eyes, is the same thing as security, the state of being protected from attack by others. So what that usually means, our world tells us, is that peace comes through strength of one form or another. In order to have peace, that is, security, you have to have the ability to harm someone else badly enough that they won’t want to take the risk of attacking you, or at least you have to make them think you have the ability. Peace comes through strength. If you want peace, prepare for war. Did you know that the military budget of the United States accounts for something like forty percent of the military spending of the entire world? We spend more on our military than the next nine biggest military spenders combined. I’m not preaching against the military, I’m just helping us see how much our world’s concept of peace relies on war. We make people afraid, so that we can promise them security, so they will elect us, so we can build more weapons, and on and on it goes.

Or, to bring it to a more individual level, we have those in our society who preach the message that “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.” If you want peace, prepare for war. Peace through strength. I’m not trying to stoke the debate about gun laws, but that message sounds to me like pretty good news for people who sell guns. For the rest of us, it doesn’t really strike me as peace. It is not a peaceful society if there is so much fear that everyone has to carry a weapon while going about their daily lives.

But are security and peace the same thing? What does security look like, or what can it look like? It’s certainly true that military victory and security can be a part of peace. We read a few verses from the prophecies of Micah, and if you read more of the chapter it’s clear that part of God’s promise was to deliver His people from their enemies. Even in verse 5, which we cut off at a strategic point, the deliverer promised by Micah “will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land.” But security can’t be all of it. You can have security and be governed by fear; that’s not peace. You can live in an underground bunker, eking out a hollow existence, and be secure, but that’s not peace. You can be secure by killing everyone who disagrees with you, but that’s not peace.

The kind of people Jesus will be looking for when He returns will be marked by more than just a lack of violence. The world’s definition of peace as an absence of military hostilities is clearly insufficient when we look at the ways God works in human society; there’s more to peace in God’s kingdom. But is our understanding of peace within the church really that much better? You can tell a lot about what people believe by what they sing; it’s certainly true that we get our theology through

reading and study and lecture and preaching, but in some ways our singing is a truer reflection of what we believe. Our songs form us as much as they make us feel. They give us a vocabulary for what we believe in addition to the vocabulary we receive from Scripture. That's why we're careful in what songs we choose to sing together; some songs you'll hear on the radio but won't hear in our worship, or some songs we'll sing together that may not be cool enough to sing elsewhere. It's because songs say something, believe it or not.

So what do our songs say about what we believe about God's peace? "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like seas billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'" "What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, leaning on the everlasting arms! Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms." "There is a place of full release, near to the heart of God; a place where all is joy and peace, near to the heart of God." "O there's sunshine, blessed sunshine, while the peaceful, happy moments roll. When Jesus shows His smiling face, there is sunshine in my soul." Those are not bad songs at all, and they're not wrong, but even in the church we tend to focus only on a small part of peace. Peace in our theology so often equates to peacefulness within, "sunshine in my soul," a state of mind or an emotion of calm and assurance. Too often in our theology, peace is a state of being, not an action. Peace is something you have within regardless of what's going on around you; it's not something you build or participate in. And it's certainly good news that trusting in the faithfulness of God does indeed give you that assurance of His goodness regardless of the evils of the world. It's just that the good news is bigger and more powerful than we give it credit for being.

The fuller definition of peace in the Bible looks an awful lot like justice mixed with reconciliation and right relationships. Not justice as we define it today, where the bad guys get punished in proportion to their badness, but justice in the sense of wholeness, harmony, rightness being given to those to whom it has been denied. Our reading from Micah, once again, certainly emphasizes security for God's people. It's a messianic prophecy, a promise of one who will be sent by God and anointed by God to "stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord." Micah was prophesying when the Assyrian Empire was marauding across the Middle East, ruthlessly demolishing little kingdoms like Israel. More than just security, Micah's people were concerned with not being brutally murdered by the Assyrians. One of God's promises is that He will deliver His people from this threat, which He did indeed do. But there's more, if we keep reading the book. God's promise of peace is bigger.

This peace involves right relationship with God. Later in that chapter, the Lord says through Micah that He will "destroy your witchcraft, and you will no longer cast spells." He will "destroy your idols...you will no longer bow down to the work of your hands." The point being that God will remove those things that have tempted the people away from the pure worship of God. And in the next chapter, God lays out His case against His faithless people, and His prosecution involves things like dishonest businesses, the violence of the wealthy, and a pervasive deceitfulness. And in the midst of it, God tells them what He's looking for: "what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Our other text for today is what is known as the Magnificat, a name that comes from the first words of the Latin translation of Mary's song. These are the words of a young woman, probably still a teenager, who is facing a situation unlike anything anyone has faced before, and yet she displays a

thorough understanding of what sort of God she worships. She knows what kinds of things God wants to accomplish. Her song is not a peaceful song, but it sings of the sort of peace God brings: a powerful, active, challenging peace. She sings of a God who “scatters those who are proud,” and He has “brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” What’s more, “He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.” That is hardly a peaceful, quiet, calm, serene Christmas message. In fact, depending on where you are on the political and economic spectrum, that might sound an awful lot like revolutionary thinking. Mary is not singing about violence, but she’s also not just singing about sunshine in her soul, and she’s not singing about togetherness and warm feelings and chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Her reaction to the news of the incarnation of the living God is to sing of His reordering of the world to bring about His kind of peace.

The peace of Christmas, the peace of this celebration of the coming of the Prince of Peace, transforms everyone who comes near it. It is not just a peace that makes you feel good. In fact, some people are far too comfortable at Christmastime for their own good, and peace for them would involve some very uncomfortable changes. God’s peace involves the assurance of security, yes, because God can be counted on to deliver His people. And God’s peace involves the feeling within of peace with God that abides through all circumstances, yes, because He does indeed offer us reconciliation with Himself. But more than that, God’s peace calls us to live lives that are rightly ordered, and He calls us to engage in transforming our relationships and our communities and our world so that they are also rightly ordered. His peace roots out the idols in our lives, and it lifts up the humble in our world, and it challenges systems of injustice both large and small, and that sort of peace can be very threatening to those who are invested in the old systems. God’s call to peace can be very threatening to those who profit from war and fear. And yet Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, and if He is *our* prince, then we are called to His peace.

As we’ve been celebrating Advent this year, this season that is focused on both the first coming of the Lord and His second coming, we’ve been trying to prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas by making ourselves ready for Jesus’ return. He is coming back, and we join in with the cry of the church through the ages: “Come *quickly*, Lord Jesus.” But what will He find when He returns? What will He find among His people? The prophet Micah had to preach against the violence committed by God’s people; not just physical violence, but the oppression of the powerful against the humble. That was still an issue when Jesus was born, or else Mary wouldn’t have sung about it. And indeed Jesus did have to preach against just such things. What will He find among us?

This week we celebrate one of the highest holidays of the Christian calendar, the celebration of the arrival of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It’s a time when we can so easily be lulled and distracted away from the message of the Prince of Peace. Jesus is the reason for the season, we so often insist, and that’s true, but just making sure people remember Jesus at Christmastime is hardly enough. What did He come for? What was His message? What sort of peace is He the Prince of? Make this Christmas a time of preparation in your life, a time of building peace, a time of getting your life and your world ready for when Jesus comes again. Examine your life, your relationships, your words, your actions, and your community: where are you building peace, and where are you tearing it down? Where are you trading peace for peacefulness or security or serenity, and robbing it of the active power of the peace of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Let there be peace on earth to those on whom God’s favor rests.



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