

Every year at the end of the Gospel Christmas Concert at Willis Chapel we always sing “Let There Be Peace On Earth.” It is a beautiful moment where people from different churches and who live in different places all over the community come together for a moment of peace before Christmas. For me, this is one of the most powerful moments of Christmas. This song reminds us that the reason for this season is Jesus Christ and that ultimately God will bring us peace through Him.

As we approach Christmas this week you may be feeling anything but peaceful. Maybe you still have several gatherings to attend or have a mountain of presents to wrap. Maybe you are still working on getting out all those Christmas cards. Yet in this season of hustle and bustle through our faith, Jesus Christ offers to us the gift of peace every day.

The word we know as peace and the word Christ used as peace are translated very differently. The chapter this week for our book study was on “Altogether Peace” by Pastor Magrey DeVega and in his chapter he said, “Unlike our word for peace, which can really mean the absence of war, or a feeling of serenity or contentment” peace the way Jesus used it from the Hebrew word shalom “speaks of wholeness, completeness, and fullness.”ⁱ

We see Jesus offer this kind of peace in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” You see Jesus was preparing the disciples for his departure from earth. Jesus was telling them that he was making a way that he could still be with them so they could continue their ministry unafraid.

The disciples were not feeling peaceful as Jesus kept telling them over and over again that he would be killed. Like the disciples, we too have experienced this uneasiness in our spirit. We long for Christ to return, but in the meantime, we acknowledge that there are a lot of wars going on in our world today.

There is a political war going on in our nation that is dividing us. This kind of war highlights that humanity is at war with one another. We also experience this warring with others and in ourselves when we find ourselves in conflict with a friend or family member. We long for peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but so often it is hard to see a way forward when we all seem to be such different people.

We find ourselves at war with ourselves. We are at war with ourselves when we are never satisfied with who we are or what we have accomplished. We are at war with ourselves when we get stuck in the past and miss out on the future. We are at war with ourselves when we are paralyzed in fear and unable to make decisions that lead to life.

We are at war with God. We are at war with God when our fear causes us to question God’s will for our lives. We are at war with God when our anger makes us unable to see all the ways in which God is working all around us.

In our Gospel lesson today from the Gospel of Matthew we hear again the retelling of Christ’s birth. This time we see Joseph’s side. Here we find that he now knows his fiancé is pregnant and the baby is not his.

We can imagine, Joseph may have found himself at war with himself, Mary and God. How could this happen? He was about to start a new life with Mary. Maybe he could dismiss her quietly and start over. What would other people think? Could he really believe that God had something to do with this?

How could he know that Mary was telling the truth? Was she trying to break up with him? How could she ask him to stay with her after this?

Not to mention, Joseph was scared. Scared that the life he was trying to build was crumbling. Scared that life would never be the same. In our Scripture for today we see that God brought him peace from an angel. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” (Matthew 1:20b). In a dream this angel of the Lord comforted Joseph and provided assurance that what was happening in his life was orchestrated by God.

Joseph awoke now unafraid and he was finally able to move forward and accept this child as his own son. Joseph awoke with a feeling of peace.

Although we may not be visited by an angel of the Lord, God also bestows peace upon us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Peace is not always the state of our lives. It is a state of our minds, souls, and a state of action. Even when there is war all around us. Even when storms rage and flood waters come, Christ continues to offer us peace. Christ calms the storms of our lives and continues to offer us peace, no matter the circumstances.

You know the very first word the Jesus uttered to the disciples when he had risen from the dead was: “Peace be with you.”

John 20:19-22: ¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews,^[c] Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Jesus offered the disciples peace after they denied him, betrayed him, and deserted him. Not just once, but twice, then he gave them the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Peace always requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. So how can we live lives of peace in our day to day lives?

Practicing the virtue of peace means we first have to be at peace with God. We have to completely trust that God is our Father and that God loves us with an unconditional love. This is the foundation of our peace because this is a promise that never changes. This means we take time to center ourselves through our faith in God. We take time each day to pray and study about who God is.

Second, we have to be at peace with ourselves. When we are at war with ourselves this carries over into our relationships. We have to find peace in the people God created each of us to be and accept ourselves.

When we have peace with God and ourselves, we then exhibit this virtue to others. Living a life of peace means that we foster unity in the body of Christ. It means that we are helpful and not divisive.

Living lives of peace requires us to stop and think. It calls us to be patient with others and really think about their motivations for the things they say and do. It means that we learn not to take everything personally and move beyond past grudges and hurts. It means that we forgive so that we can offer others this amazing gift of peace.

Living a life of peace begins with each and every one of us.

The good news for all of us is that God is always offering us peace.

In the retelling of Christ’s birth, we see this gift of God’s peace come alive through Jesus Christ. Jesus led a ministry of peace and he called the disciples to do the same.

Jesus gave his life so that we could live and have peace. You know the disciples were not perfect. They had many of the same struggles that we have. They experienced all different kinds of war including physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Living of life of peace has a lot to do with the way we conduct ourselves. In “Almost Christmas” Magrey DeVega calls us to read Ephesians 4 using the lens of peace and unity. In this Scripture, the Apostle Paul calls us to embody attributes of peace including speaking truth, watching our anger, practicing empathy, and being kind, compassionate and forgiving.ⁱⁱ

The way we treat other people shows others a lot about the state of our souls. When we are at peace with God, this peace overflows into our faith and our relationships. When we are at war with God and others, we do not do our best evangelism.

This last week of Advent may we all identify any area of our lives where we feel at war with others, ourselves, or God. We are called to really take a deep look at our lives so that we can do the hard work of discernment, prayer and study so that we can follow Christ in the way of peace.

Another sacred moment of peace happens for me on Christmas Eve when we all sing “Silent Night” together. There is something beautiful that happens in the darkness of night when everyone lights a candle and sings about the love of God through the birth of Christ. The first verse of “Silent Night” retells the birth of Christ:

“Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright. Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child. Holy infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

Christ’s peace is the thing that brings unity. Even when we find ourselves at war, Christ’s peace can penetrate our hearts so we will see the gift we have of God and one another.

In “Almost Christmas” DeVega told a story of how God turned enemies into friends.

In 1914, nineteen-year-old British soldier, Charles Brewer, was in the midst of World War I in Europe. Brewer told this story: “A British sentry suddenly spied a glistening light on the German [side], less than one hundred yards away. Warned it may be a trap, Brewer slowly raised his head over a soaked sandbag. Through the maze of barbed wire, he saw a sparkling Christmas tree...he then noticed the rising of a faint sound that he had never heard before in the battlefield. Singing. In German. The words of ‘Stille Nacht...’

When the Germans finished singing, the Brits erupted with applause and instead of returning fire, they returned in song, singing the English version of that hymn. When dawn broke on Christmas morning, something even more remarkable happened. In sporadic pockets all along the five-hundred-mile Western Front, unarmed German and Allied soldiers tentatively emerged from the trenches and cautiously crossed no-man’s land to exchange gifts and to wish each other a Merry Christmas...”ⁱⁱⁱ

These men who had been trying to kill each other a couple of hours before, found peace and unity through the birth of Jesus Christ.

This is the kind of power Christ’s peace has; to eradicate hatred and fear and bring us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Today we give thanks to God for the Prince of Peace in our lives. May we accept the gift of Christ’s peace once again this Christmas. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Magrey De Vega. “Almost Christmas.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2019. P. 24 & 25.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 30 & 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 33 & 34.