

SERMON: May Peace Prevail

TEXT: Luke 1:46-55

*Listen, children, to a story that was written long ago 'bout a kingdom on a mountain and the valley folk below. On the mountain was a treasure buried deep beneath a stone, and the valley people swore they'd have it for their very own. So, the people of the valley sent a message up the hill asking for the buried treasure, tons of gold for which they'd kill. Came an answer from the mountain, "With our brothers we will share all the secrets of our mountain, all the riches buried there." Now the valley cried with anger, "Mount your horses, draw your swords!" And they killed the mountain people, so they won their just reward. Now they stood beside the treasure on the mountain darkened red, turned the stone and looked beneath it. "Peace on earth," was all it said. Go ahead and hate your neighbor; go ahead and cheat a friend. If you do it in the name of heaven you can justify it in the end. There won't be any trumpet blowin' come the judgment day on the bloody morning after one tin soldier rides away.*

Perhaps you recognize these words as the lyrics to a popular war protest song from the early 1970's. If I may brag for just a moment, I didn't have to ask Google to remind me of the words. I've had them memorized for decades. I used to sing the song at the top of my lungs over and over again as I played on the swing

set in my backyard. Now that I think about it, I wonder if the neighbors wished for some of the peace about which I sang so passionately?!

Of course, at only 10 or 12 years of age, I didn't fully understand the concept of war and peace. To be honest, I still don't. I've never been to war, so I don't understand what it feels like to be in a place where your life is in danger every moment of every day. I don't know what it feels like to have to choose to take one person's life – or many lives – in order to save other lives, or myself. I don't know what it feels like to be sent to fight the enemy. So, I know that singing about peace or talking about peace must be vastly easier said than done.

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of peace. This is the season of *peace on earth*. Those three little words look lovely on our decorations and the cards we send. It is a beautiful sentiment to share with one another. And, thanks to a Charlie Brown Christmas and the young theologian Linus, we all have the words of scripture memorized. So that when we hear the angels proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest," we can recite the rest of the sentence: "And on earth peace, good will toward men." We even know Linus' commentary that follows: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

Of course, this theologian feels compelled to remind you that it's not Christmas yet. We are still in the season of Advent; a time of preparing, a time of waiting. And when we get on the subject of peace on earth, we know all too well that we are clearly not there yet. Not even close.

In fact, the gospel lesson for the day is *Mary's Song of Praise*, also known as *The Magnificat*. Though tomorrow we will be celebrating a baby in a manger, at this point in the story, Mary has only just learned that she is with child.

And her response is astonishing. Young and unmarried, her life will be in danger when word of this gets out. Joseph, her betrothed, would be well within his rights under the law to have her stoned to death for adultery. But Mary – instead of hiding or running away or seeking some protection – sings. She sings a song of rejoicing for what God has done and for what God will do in the future, through the child in her womb.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,” she sings, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” She sings of mercy and justice. “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their

thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

What Mary is describing is a great leveling of the playing field, where equity and equality replace the idea of blessing and curse, where those on the outside are welcomed in, where the unlovable are loved. Only through such justice MAY PEACE PREVAIL.

Some of us studied a book titled, *Names for the Messiah*, this month in Sunday School. We learned what it really meant to those in the time of Isaiah to be awaiting one who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The author, Walter Brueggemann, points out that Solomon was thought to be a king of peace, “for his very name is a play on [the word] *shalom*,” which means *welfare*. “It is clear, however, that Solomon’s policies depended on heavy armaments as well as cheap labor that reflected a willingly coercive policy antithetical to *social welfare*.” In contrast, the Psalms imagine that “the premise of peace is the practice of justice for the poor and needy, and that anticipated peace includes a more general prosperity for the people, that is, not just for the urban elites clustered around the king. In this anticipation there is

none of the coercion of exploitative policies that marked the actual practice of Solomon.”

The idea of peace in the Old Testament exists only in rhetoric, in liturgy, in vision and imagination. Only in Jesus does peace become a practice. Only in Jesus does peace become the reality.

And yet, as Brueggemann explains, “this is no normal peace; the peace [Jesus] brings is dangerous, subversive, and a contradiction of all that is usual.... It deeply contradicts the expectation of those who trusted the Roman Empire, Jews, and others.” Jesus’ “mission from God is *peace* that defies the way the world is organized.”

Even the peace that we expect in our day is far from what we expect of the Prince of Peace. We want an easy peace. We want the world to be overcome with a spirit of kindness, generosity, selflessness, and forgiveness. We want the simple, easy, quiet candlelight of a Christmas Eve service to change the world. But it doesn’t work that way. If it doesn’t change us, it’s not going to change the world.

In order for peace to prevail, to take over our lives, to become commonplace in the world, we need to continue the ways of Jesus, the things that make for peace.

According to Brueggemann, “Peace requires the capacity to forgive. Peace requires a readiness to share generously. Peace requires the violation of strict class stratification in society. Peace requires attentiveness to the vulnerable and the unproductive. Peace requires humility in the face of exaltation, being last among those who insist on being first and denying self in the interest of the neighbor. These are all practices that mark [the] presence [of Jesus] in society.”

The Prince of Peace came to do justice.

A baby in a manger is something everyone loves. But a revolutionary is highly unpopular. May we embrace the man as we embrace the child, and may we find peace as well as empowerment that peace may prevail.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.