

Peace on Earth

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Sermon text: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Luke 2:14

What would peace on earth look like?

I know what joy looks like. It looks the entire country of Argentina after their national team, led by Lionel Messi, won the World Cup. Great game. But the people—absolutely crazy for their national team, waiting since 1986 for another World Cup—practically exploded with joy and relief. I understand there have been some racist taunts included in that celebration—along with an exuberant topless display by some women—but five million people, suffering under a crushing near 100% inflation rate and other problems, mostly simply erupted in joy and song, including wonderful songs for grandmothers for some reason.

I know what suffering looks like. It looks like war—the opposite of peace—especially war inflicted on civilians, cities being shelled, light and heat targeted, soldiers maimed and killed. It looks like Ukraine—which nevertheless seems to be triumphing in spirit and grit, witnessed and led by their president, who made a remarkable trip from the frontlines to Washington DC to address congress and thank the American people for their support.

I know what cold feels like—along with something like 200 million other Americans this week. Crazy weather events are becoming increasingly frequent and severe, part of the climate change exacerbated by human industrial activity—including the infrastructure that keeps us warm and lighted. Without which, like hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, we could be suffering this cold snap with many great difficulty and many deaths of the oldest and youngest and most vulnerable.

So perhaps peace looks like a warm beach where young people play games while their elders cheer. A place where conflicts are not settled by violence but by competition among ideas and choosing among leaders with various visions. A place where the defeated accept their loss and prepare for the next round. A place where the victorious do not aggregate power to ensure future victories but try to earn support by delivering on the promises of their vision. A place where change is accepted as inevitable and often unpredictable but which is

addressed with practical wisdom and appropriate urgency. And maybe where you have changing seasons, which may even be better than a static paradise, but in which energy is provided by renewable sources which do not add carbon to the atmosphere.

Well, is such a vision impossible? Is peace on earth too much to hope for?

We are people of faith, followers of Christ. We cannot accept the inevitability of brutal war and violent oppression. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus said. And the angels at his birth sang a song of celebration to the shepherds on the hill: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Luke 2:14

Peace on earth among those whom he favors. This translation seems to suggest there will only be peace among some of the people on earth—those whom God favors—while others, by implication, remain condemned to the cycles of oppression, war and suffering that history is so full of. This also seems to imply that God’s favor is not decisive, for two millennia of war have followed the birth of Jesus—and still we see war among nations, hatred within them.

I prefer the old King James version: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” This praises God and sends a blessing of peace and good will toward the human world in his name.

But is there a difference in effect? Does not God’s favor rest of those who have good will, and doesn’t peace depend on both God and humanity’s will to good?

And for those who act out of hate and a will to power—are not they opposed to God’s will and so invite God’s own disfavor and opposition? I think so.

So this is the lesson I take from the angels’ message: **God wills peace and favors those who act according to the way of love, but this remains a way that faces opposition, a way that must fight, generation after generation, against the darkness and sin that humans are also heirs of. God will not impose peace—as a tyrant or puppet master—but through the law and the prophets, through the way of Jesus and through all the acts of love and compassion of all people of good will, God has shown us the way toward peace—and calls us to follow it.**

And I would add, by “us” I do not mean only those of us who are respectable, right-thinking, law-abiding, nonviolent do-gooders. Good church-going folks such as us here. I include the sinners and the lost, the addicted and the

extremists, the zealots and power-hungry as well. Non-believers, even those who Paul somewhere calls the enemies of God. Because all are included in the favor of God through the grace of Jesus. That is the meaning of his life and ministry, who, though divine, became human as poor and powerless, as a dependent child who later suffered death as a victim of imperial power. Who forgave those who killed him, who welcomed sinners, tax collectors, prostitute to his company—and questioned the pride and conceits of those who were powerful and boasted of their goodness. His example shows us that God indeed favors all—and calls all to become better, to become more fully human, to live more vividly into their nature as made in the image of God. To become Christ-like.

So on this cold winter's night, sheltered in this sacred space where generations have worshipped God, sung hymns, prayed for peace and health and happiness, shared the bread and the cup, the body and blood of Christ, and gone from here to serve the world in Christ's name. This place, this sacred mystery where later in the service we will sing by candlelight "Silent Night." This sacred hour in which we remember all the Christmases before, and pray for all the days ahead, and for the children who will live into them. for a future of peace, of warmth and light, of joy and challenge, even suffering, but suffering embraced and enfolded by a larger meaning and purpose, guided by a vision of world such as the prophets saw. In that spirit, let us hear again the words of the prophet Isaiah. Please, close your eyes as I read. And while you listen pray as well. Hear the words as both a confirmation of God's plan and favor and a reaffirmation of your call to join other people of good will who work to make this a world, to borrow a phrase, more peaceful, verdant and just.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined...
For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Let the people say, Amen.

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