

Advent Sermon Series 2008

*Preparing for the Gifts of Christmas 4: Prepare for Peace*

Isaiah 2:2-5

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

21 December 2008

We've been talking this advent about how we have to prepare ourselves for the gifts of Christmas, particularly the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace. The first three, hope, love and joy, we kind of take for granted. We assume they come automatically. We're not used to thinking about how we have to prepare for them. Yet we've seen how these too take work, preparation, effort on our part.

The fourth one, though, peace, is in a different category from the others. There's nothing automatic about peace. I think we can all agree that peace requires preparation and effort. The challenge that peace presents, though, is whether we believe it's even possible. Years ago when I was a kid, I received a Christmas card that said, "Christmas is the one time of year when, for a moment, peace seems possible after all." I kept that card. I still have it. It's meant a lot to me over the years, but these days I'm a bit more cynical about its message. For a moment? And it only *seems* possible? You could actually read that card in a very negative way.

It's really struck me this year, maybe because I was doing this series and knew the subject of peace would be coming up, but as I listen to the Christmas radio station, it really struck me how many Christmas songs mention peace. Hymns, contemporary pop songs, even children's ditties like "Here Comes Santa Claus," which contains the line, "Peace on earth will come to all if we just follow the light." Peace gets a lot of air time at this time of year, but what are we really talking about? Is this just lip service? I start to wonder if peace is like Santa Claus, a story we tell children, but it's not something we grown-ups really believe in.

And yet, peace is one of our Christmas gifts. If hope, joy, and love are real, then peace must be real too. God does not give false gifts. God does not lie. The angels come with the message, "Peace on earth and goodwill to all people. For unto us a child is born, and he shall be called the Prince of Peace." This is one of our Christmas gifts, but it perhaps requires even more effort on our part to receive it than the others do. It will be hard work, but one thing God didn't promise us: God never said it would be easy. God did promise, though, to give us what we need to get the job done.

First of all, let's clarify what exactly we're talking about when it comes to peace. We tend to think that peace is the absence of war, the absence of conflict. Seems logical, right? And we have plenty of Christmas stories about combating soldiers laying down their guns at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve – and at least one of those stories is true!

But the picture in the Bible is a bit different. Our passage from Isaiah talks about "nation will not take up sword against nation," but there's still more going on. The nations come to the mountain of God to learn God's ways and walk in the paths of justice and righteousness. The way of God includes liberty to the captive, care for widows and orphans, people tilling their own fields, living in their own homes. It's what we see in Jesus: forgiveness, reconciliation, a new community. It's a sense of people living together in harmony, in concord.

It's a beautiful image, and through we're probably all familiar with those themes, it's nevertheless hard for us to picture how that actually works. We tend to think that harmony means folks all living in agreement; no disagreement allowed. Concord, not discord. But that's not very realistic, is it? So we conclude that peace must not be possible.

Yet there are times when discord makes for beautiful music. Literally! I'm no musical expert, but I've sung in a lot of choirs. Music would be boring if everybody was always singing the same notes. Harmony is what we call it when people sing different notes at the same time, but it all sounds pretty together. Now, there are some regular patterns of how different notes can sound pretty together – chords and whatnot. And most of the time, harmonies fall into these conventional patterns. But there is a place in music for discord: a note that stands out as not fitting.

I'm an alto, and we tend to get those notes a lot. (Glenda and I had several of those in our Christmas music program. They say altos are sopranos who can read music!) And these discordant notes aren't just randomly stuck in there. The music is built up using conventional harmonies, and then it reaches this moment of tension, a crucial moment, and that's when those notes appear – harsh, jarring. They don't sound like they fit. The discordant moment doesn't last. We move on to a more conventional chord to reconcile it all, but that discordant note, coming at an important point, makes the ending all the sweeter. Musically, I don't know why it works that way, but as an analogy for peace, it presents a very intriguing image of how peace actually works, that it needs discord, dissenting voices. Tension, even conflict – but not outright violence.

It's a different image from how we usually think of peace, with everyone singing in unison, where we tend to see people who sing something different as disrupting of the peace. We may even think of them as evil, something to be opposed to and eliminated. Now, there are evil things that happen in the world, and they should be opposed, but violence is not the only way to oppose them. It's especially important for us to respond nonviolently when you consider that we're not always very good at discerning what is evil from what is merely discordant. Nonviolence can be a very effective way of combating violence precisely because it leaves open the possibility of reconciliation, of bringing that discord into harmony.

We Christians are called to be agents of peace in the world, from the personal level to the global. This doesn't preclude Christians from serving in police or military forces, because those folks above all know how important peace and nonviolence are. Peace is so important and precious, yet this is the gift we are the least prepared to receive. The obstacles to peace are similar to the other obstacles we've been talking about this month: cynicism and a lack of imagination, the desire to control others rather than love them as they are, self-consciousness and the fear of appearing foolish. Indeed, hope, love, and even joy are all important elements of peace.

But in addition to all these, peace requires us to give up our illusion of self-sufficiency, our mistaken belief that it's all up to us, that we can handle everything ourselves. Again, think of that choir. Specifically, let's consider the Hallelujah Chorus. If you took any one of those parts on its own, it would sound strange. It wouldn't sound beautiful at all. Each part gets its own showcase moment, but each one also at times plays a supporting role to others. The alto part has sections that make no sense at all unless everyone is singing together. The different parts of the choir and of the orchestra all need each other. They support one another and are in turn supported. There's no such thing as a one person Hallelujah Chorus!

Living in peace requires the same thing. It requires us to trust one another, to rely on one another, to accept the fact that none of us is going to make it on our own. As Martin Luther King put it, "We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or we will perish together as fools."