



Peace On Earth

Text: Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 2:8-14

Series: Advent 2018 [#2]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

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Theme: **Christmas Celebrates Christ Bringing True, Everlasting Peace To Earth.**

Introduction

Peace On Earth. Peace on earth is something people have deeply desired ever since sin entered the world. Peace has many different dimensions, from personal to relationships to nations to internationally. And then there is the big question of what is it in each area? How do you describe it? How do you measure it?

Think about the national and international levels of peace. There are organizations that define what they think it means for a country to be more and less peaceful, and rank countries accordingly. One organization uses twenty-three indicators which fall under three broad categories. First, the level of social safety and security; second, the extent of ongoing domestic and international conflict; and third, the degree of militarization.¹ In their scheme countries which spend significant sums of money on defense and the military are ranked lower than those which don't. That is their viewpoint, their bias. How does Canada rank on the lists of most peaceful countries? Depending on the organization and their scale, we generally rank 6th, 7th or 8th. The country viewed as most peaceful by almost if not all such rankings is Iceland, which has a population of only about 338,000 people.²

If you watch or read the news you will see a constant, striking picture of a world without peace, and unbelievably horrific costs by every measure! These views alone can lead to pessimism and despair even in churches in this season as we think about peace on earth.

The words of the third verse of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, written after the tragic accidental death of his wife and his son being seriously wounded in the U.S. Civil War, may strike a cord with many today. He wrote, "There is no peace on earth ... for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."³

"Peace On Earth. *Really?*"

We are looking at *Peace* on this second Sunday of Advent. We will note several familiar Biblical claims about peace, try to understand what they are about, and zero in on knowing and experiencing the reality of true peace. The core truth for this morning is that *Christmas celebrates Christ bringing true, everlasting peace to earth.*

The Promise: Christ, The Messiah Will Bring Peace.

The promise of the Bible is that Christ, the Messiah will bring peace. The Bible tells us that the Messiah, who is the Prince of Peace, will establish and uphold peace. Go to the familiar words in Isaiah chapter 9, verses 6-7, which was part of our Scripture reading earlier.

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor [or in other versions, Wonderful Counselor, NASB, ESV, NLT], Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

When we hear the title *Prince*, we tend to think of royalty. This term was used much more broadly in its over 380 occurrences in the Old Testament. It spoke of the leader of a group, of a military force, of a province or nation. Generally, it referred to one who is in control, who provides direction and has authority. Isaiah chapter 9 verse 6 tells us that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is the ruler over, the one who possesses and dispenses peace.

Last week we looked at and thought about those beautiful words in Isaiah chapter 2,

“He [the Messiah] shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (verse 4).

And, we can turn ahead to Isaiah’s description of peace under the Messiah’s reign in chapter 11,

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (verses 6-9).

There is much truth here, but for now note the *promise*: Christ, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace will establish and uphold peace. That is God’s *promise*.

Then, moving from the promise, we turn to the New Testament’s record and description of Christ’s coming to earth: the Messiah’s birth brought peace to earth. After the angel’s startling appearance and announcement to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born, it was joined by a huge choir of angels which, Luke records, was “praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom He is pleased’” (ESV).⁴ “Let there be peace!” “Peace has come to earth!”

Just over 60 years later the Apostle Paul developed this in Ephesians chapter 2, starting by telling us in verse 14, “For [Jesus] Himself *is our peace*” (verse 14). And so, there is the Bible’s promise — Christ the Messiah, *will* bring peace.

The Problem: Where Is The Peace?

But, there is a problem. Where is the peace? The absence of peace is conspicuously obvious in our world. Watch, listen to and read the news about the unending string of strife, battles and wars, the ongoing, serious economic turbulence, the constant and growing family fractures, and of so much personal distress.

Here in Canada the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health reports that in any given year 1 in 5 Canadians experiences a mental illness or addiction problem. Also, by the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, 1 in 2 have — or have had — a mental illness. Looking at young people, 70% of mental health problems have their onset during childhood or adolescence. And, finally, it tells us that 34% of Ontario high-school students indicate a

moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression). 14% indicate a serious level of psychological distress.⁵

Yes, it certainly looks as though “There is no peace on earth ... for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.”

So we need to look more deeply, we need to sharpen our understanding of the Bible’s truth about peace. The *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* gives two basic meanings of *peace*: freedom from noise or anxiety; and freedom from or the ending of war.⁶

From here let’s go to the Biblical meaning of peace. The Hebrew word for peace we have here in Isaiah chapter 9 verse 6 occurs at least 210 times in the Old Testament. It is a Hebrew word many of us know, *shalom*.

The background to this word comes from the ideas of completion, fulfillment, wholeness and unity. Its use in the Old Testament had the ideas of peace and safety for a nation. That is, not being threatened, or not being at war. Secondly, there was the idea of wholeness in both a literal and figurative sense.

In Deuteronomy chapter 27 we find an interesting literal usage. The laws of God were given to the people of Israel before crossing the Jordan into their promised land. In verse 5 we read,

“Moreover, you shall build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not wield an iron tool on them. You shall build the altar of the LORD your God of *uncut stones*, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings to the LORD your God” (verses 5-6, NASB).

Can you spot the word peace? Our English word is not there in our versions, but the word *uncut* is our word *shalom* — *whole*, here meaning unworked, uncut.

Another stream of meaning is to be fulfilled or complete. In Genesis chapter 15 verse 16 we read “the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet *complete*.” The word *complete* is our word, *shalom*.

One application of this idea of fulfilling or completing, found at least 18 times in the Old Testament is to *fulfill, pay, make good* on your promises. We see it in Psalm 50 verse 14 that directs, “Offer to God thanksgiving and *pay* your vows to the Most High.” The word *pay* is our word *shalom*.

Then, a very frequent usage expresses a sense of *well being*, being in *harmony*. The majority of those uses describe a state which results from God being involved.

And, of course, there was that sense of well being that became a greeting, the equivalent of “Hello” and “Goodbye,” which has continued to our day.

The overall sense, then, is of being complete, whole, in harmony, being fulfilled. This is peace. It is much more than freedom from noise or anxiety or freedom from or the ending of war. It is an inner state, a quality of relationships that people value and want.

The Provision: The Savior Born For Us, Christ The Lord.

But how do we go from here to there? From the shaking and shattering turbulence to peace? What, where is the true source of real peace?

Albert Schweitzer, a theologian, musician, physician and missionary who died in 1965, wrote,

“In the hearts of people today there is a deep longing for peace. When the true spirit of peace is thoroughly dominant, it becomes an inner experience with unlimited possibilities. Only when this really happens, when the spirit of peace awakens and takes possession of men’s hearts, can humanity be saved from perishing.”⁷

As thoughtful and interesting as that is and as are the questions it raises, this statement doesn’t really answer the where and how. To answer this question we turn to the provision of peace, to the Savior Born For Us, Christ the Lord.

The Prince of Peace came to earth, but not as most expected. We know the gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ birth did not match what most people expected for the Messiah’s arrival on scene. Mary and Joseph were in David’s line, but not recognized as anything remotely like royalty. When the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in her womb Mary was betrothed or engaged to Joseph, but the marriage process was not completed. Apparently they were not well-connected, because no close or distant relatives in Bethlehem took them in when they came to this their ancestral home register for the tax. God the Father did provide an unusual birth announcement by an angel. However, it was to low class shepherds. The spectacular mass choir praising God was also to those looked-down-on shepherds. And then, yes, later

some *Gentile* magi, not Jews, came to worship and presented their precious gifts to Jesus, whom they recognized as the One “born King of the Jews.”⁸ All of this happened in a way that no person then or now would have scripted.

But even more unexpected than the way was the *nature* of God’s provision of the Messiah, the One bringing His peace. Turn to John’s Christmas story, although we may not recognize it as such, chapter 1 in the gospel. We find that on page 1220 in the church Bibles. Verse 1.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend [or, overcome] it” (verses 1-5).

Now drop down to verse 14.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Forget about a stable instead of a palace, the lowing of cattle and bleating of sheep instead of the sweet songs of court singers, the smell of manure instead of the fragrance of perfume. Who could ever have expected *this*?

But what is this about, this statement “the Word?” The first thing we think of when we hear or read the term *word* is, of course, what we say, our words. In Greek culture, going back 500 years before Christ, the term was used philosophically to refer not only to words, but to thoughts, thinking and reason. Some used it to refer to a divine or impersonal, abstract reason that controlled and directed our world. The philosopher Plato, who died about 350 years before Christ was born, reportedly said, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, a *Logos*, who will reveal all the mysteries and make everything plain.”⁹

What God is telling us through John is that, yes, this has happened! Eternal God the Son came! He who is the true, eternal creator God, and true man.

The Old Testament has statements about the Messiah which clearly point us to the Messiah being more than just a man. But to the average first century person in Israel, this was not an expectation or even on the radar screen at all.

God Himself came to earth in human form to bring His peace. The prince of peace came to earth, but not as most expected.

As well, Jesus brought peace to earth but, once again, not as most expected. To the Jews in first century Israel the focus of peace was on the Messiah King who would free them from Roman rule, restore their independence and bring prosperity.

Today we look for personal peace. Peace within and peace in our relationships. And, yes, many, many look for freedom from wars and threats of wars.

The peace which Christ brought to earth, the peace which transforms people and relationships, God's peace, goes deeper. It addresses our deepest need, even though we don't always recognize it. It is spiritual peace. It is peace with God that then makes it possible for us to have unshakeable peace.

To state the obvious, we need to start at the beginning. In many churches there is a special service during Advent called Lessons and Carols. As the title states, it is a service of reading Scripture, the Lessons, and singing Carols. If you have never been in one of these services, you may be surprised to discover that the First Reading is from Genesis chapter 3 where, as the traditional summary states, "God tells sinful Adam that he has lost the life of Paradise and that his seed will bruise the serpent's head." You see, to *start at the beginning* is to go to our condition inherited from our parents and, indeed, from Adam. To our being sinners by nature and action who are unable to do anything about that by our own, try as we might.

As Romans chapter 3 tells us, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (verse 23). And in chapter 6, "the wages of sin is death" (verse 23). It is impossible to be *good enough*, to do enough *good* to change that, as chapter 3 declares, "by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight" (verse 20, ESV). As James wrote, "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (ESV).¹⁰

But what we cannot do, God can do and has done. The great choir proclamation in Luke's gospel, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" declares this fact (ESV).¹¹ Paul wrote to Titus,

“[God] saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit” (NLT).¹²

Again, he wrote to the church at Ephesus,

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”¹³ (4-9)

And so we can have peace with God, peace within. As the opening verse of Romans 5 tells us, “having been justified by faith, we have *peace* with God *through* our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians chapter 2, again, tells us that Jesus, “Himself is our peace” (verse 14). There is a good summary in the first chapter of Colossians, starting at verse 19,

“For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in [Christ], and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made *peace* through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (verses 19-20, NASB).

God has made the provision, and not in a way most people with our *being better* and *doing better* thinking expected.

There is one more important aspect of this: actually experiencing, knowing, feeling God’s peace. Paul’s prayer and God’s desire for every believer is that God Himself would give us “peace always in every way.”¹⁴ Colossians chapter 3 tells us to “Let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts” (verse 15).

But how do we do that, “always in every way?” While God’s peace is His gift to us, we have responsibilities for enjoying it, allowing it to bloom, to rule. Let’s think about that briefly as we turn to Phlippians chapter 4, page 1351 in the church Bibles. Starting at verse 4,

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (verses 4-7).

God says, rejoice in Me all the time, be gentle. Choose not to be anxious, but bring your requests to Me, being thankful that I hear you, and then My peace will guard your heart and mind, will guard you to the core of your being. Let’s continue now at verse 8.

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy— meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you” (verses 8-9).

In addition to rejoicing, being gentle, trusting and not being anxious, keep your mind focused on God’s truth, not just to know it but living it. Then, in addition to God’s peace standing guard over you, God Himself will be with you.

Conclusion.

Peace on earth? Yes, Christ brings true, everlasting peace to earth, to each one who receives His gift.

Longfellow resolved his feelings of “there is no peace on earth” in the fourth verse of that poem as he wrote, “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: ‘God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.’”¹⁵

You may have heard about the last Japanese soldier to surrender after World War II. Lt. Onada and four other soldiers had been left in the Philippines in 1944 with the command to “carry on the mission even if Japan surrenders.” One soldier surrendered in 1950. Another was killed in a skirmish in 1954, and another in 1972. Onada continued the war alone. He ignored messages from loudspeakers and leaflets telling him to surrender so he

could go home. Over the years 13,000 men were used to try to locate him.

Finally, on March 10, 1974, almost 30 years after World War II ended, he surrendered after receiving a personal command from his former commander. Finally, the war was over and he could go home. So many years without enjoying the peace that had come.¹⁶

Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ came to earth bringing God's peace. The most important question facing every person is "Have you placed your faith in Christ and now know you are at peace with God and have the peace of God in your heart?" You may gladly, humbly say "Yes!" What about the people you know — family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances? Make sure that during this season you share the good, great news that Jesus Christ has come, that He brings true, everlasting peace for them.

As those who have received God's gift of peace, take these next few moments to thank Him for Jesus and His peace. You have peace with God. Determine to let the peace of Christ rule in your heart today, during this Christmas season, and every day. Be an ambassador of Christ's peace. There is no better gift you can give to people who are not yet at peace with God than the message of God's peace through Jesus Christ.

¹ ReviseSociology. *The Global Peace Index—What is it and How Useful Is it?* <<https://revisesociology.com/2017/06/26/global-peace-index-what-is/>>. 26 June 2017. Accessed 20 November 2018.

² ReviseSociology [#1 above].

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³ Henry W. Longfellow. *I Heard The Bells on Christmas Day*. Public Domain.

⁴ Luke 2:13b-14, ESV.

⁵ CAMH. *Mental Health and Addiction: Facts and Statistics.*

<<https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>>. 2018. Accessed 21 November 2018.

⁶ Peace. *Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- ⁷ Albert Schweitzer. Frequently cited, as in Robert Rabbin, *The Source of Peace*.
<<http://www.peace.se/?p=260>>. 2003. Accessed 21 November 2018. Original location of quote not determined.
- ⁸ Matthew 2:1-2.
- ⁹ Plato. Often cited quotation, although I have not tracked down the original source in Plato's writing at this point. See, for example, James Boice. *Foundations of The Christian Faith*. Downers Grove (IL): Baker Academic, 1988, page 300.
- ¹⁰ James 2:10, ESV.
- ¹¹ Luke 2:14, ESV.
- ¹² Titus 3:5, NLT.
- ¹³ Ephesians 2:4-9.
- ¹⁴ 2 Thessalonians 3:16.
- ¹⁵ Longfellow.
- ¹⁶ Robert D. McFadden. *Hiroo Onoda, Soldier Who Hid in Jungle for Decades, Dies at 91*.
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/18/world/asia/hiroo-onoda-imperial-japanese-army-officer-dies-at-91.html>>.

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