
A Child Is Coming

Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1.39-55

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 23, 2012 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

It's the year 2027, and the world is in chaos. War is everywhere. And worst of all, humanity is dying with no hope of survival because of an infertility pandemic that no doctor can remedy and no scientist can comprehend. An 18-year-old boy, the world's youngest human, has just died. With no future hope, the world is consumed by fear and misery and anarchy. The world's populations have dwindled, and those who remain have swarmed wealthy nations seeking means of survival. The focus zeros in on London. There we find hope. There we find mystery. There we find the potential for new life. In a nearby, out of the way village, a young woman mysteriously has become pregnant. And a small, ragtag band of rebels, hippies, and failures have the precarious task of transporting this miracle mother and her unborn child to safety. The journey is perilous. People die along the way.

The journey has not found its end, yet the time comes for the young mother-to-be to give birth. A battle between warring nationalistic sects has stopped the convoy protecting the one who is the hope of humanity. Trapped in a building with bombs and gunfire exploding all around, the young woman gives birth. The infant cries. The world stops to listen. As the group moves out of the building, and as the gunmen and soldiers hear the child's cries everything stills. Silence. The sounds of a baby. Peace. Some bow. Some bless themselves. Everyone marvels at the mysterious miracle.

This scene from the 2006 film *Children of Men* portrays a world of fear and uncertain future infused with hope because of a pregnant woman and a child of promise. It's a world much like the world of our Old Testament lesson today. God's people were in a time of suffering and exile. They were in need of hope for the future. Into this abysmal, exilic situation, the Prophet Micah proclaimed a word from the Lord. Micah spoke hope to people in turmoil. He prophesied that the Lord would provide a ruler out of one of the little clans of Judah; he would come from Bethlehem. And this ruler would bring about a new kingdom, where God is the true king. According to Micah, this new ruler would be from the line of the great King David and would stand in the covenant promises of God. Micah declared that their labor-like suffering would come to an end and would be replaced by birth-like joy. The God-provided one would stand and shepherd the wayward flock in the strength of the Lord. And this one would be great to the ends of the earth. He would be the one of peace. Micah announced that pregnant Israel would birth a child, a miracle child, a child of peace. Their present laboring would bring forth joy and peace.

When the early church read this text from Micah, they heard Jesus—Jesus, the messiah of Israel, from the lineage of David, the shepherd of God's flock, the one of peace. The early church declared that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and, through Israel, to the whole world. The church announced that the child of faithful Israel, of the blessed mother Mary, was the one who inaugurated a new reality. Because of this child, the church proclaimed a world where God is in charge, where suffering turns to joy, where exile and displacement and slavery and death do not have the final say, where there is peace. The child in Mary's womb opened an alternative world to all people. Because of this child, there is joy and peace.

The movie scene continues. The man carrying the newborn baby walks a few more steps before a nearby building explodes. The peace that came with the cries of the baby shattered like over-fired pottery shatters in a kiln. Everything changed with the child's birth, but somehow things did not change the way people expected. War continued. More people died. The baby had to be protected for the sake of humankind. Wasn't this the child of peace? Wasn't this the hoped for one? Wasn't this child providing a future beyond the fear and despair the people were experiencing?

If this were only true in the fictive reality of a movie scene, these questions would not strike us so hard. Yet, peace shattered by the continuation of violence was the experience of the early church, and it is our experience as well. Our world of automatic rifles, weapons of mass destruction, and never-ending

wars has muted the peace proclaimed by angels at Jesus' birth. We don't have to be transported to the dark ages, or other countries, or even to cities beyond our own to know that something has gone terribly awry, that peace has shattered in pieces.

Just ask Effie. Effie is our neighbor in Durham. Effie is the mother of Ebony and the grandmother of yet-to-be-born Elijah. Five years ago the relative peace that Effie knew was crushed. Two weeks before Elijah was to be born, Ebony and Elijah became names added to two ever-growing lists of victims in Durham: victims of domestic violence and victims of gun violence. Domestic violence, of course, is particularly troubling because the abuse happens within the context of a relationship that was at least formerly intimate and trusting. This violence within the framework of our closest relationships often startles, horrifies, and traps its victims in a unique way. Effie lost her daughter and grandson at the hands of Ebony's baby's dad. Lives ended. Effie's world shattered. Peace destroyed.

From the beginning, Christians have struggled with what to make of the conundrum of a world rife with violence and the proclamation that God's kingdom of peace has come with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our current response to this troubling dilemma comes in two typical forms. One way we confront this problem is with what we'll call the "spiritualized" response. Here we address our dilemma by spiritualizing and individualizing the peace offered in the present. Christ's peace, we say, is an inner calmness and serenity that comes from knowing that Christ is with us. Christ's peace comes when we are in a close, personal relationship with God. This peace keeps us steady when life seems overwhelming and ready to spin wildly beyond our grasps. This peace rests in the security of our spiritual reality with God. Ultimately, God's grander vision for peace only comes in a distant future time. We respond to our present dilemma by highlighting the deferred future action of God and by emphasizing inner, personal peace somewhat or entirely disconnected from the material realities of life.

As another option, we neither individualize nor spiritualize peace, nor do we assume it's limited to an act of God in the distant future. We'll call this the "moral example" response. We are suspicious that the spiritualization of peace misses the fullness of what Christ offers and calls us to in the present. Instead, we suggest that the peace of God's kingdom comes as we work for it through Christian social practices. We say that Jesus gives us an example of one who worked for the wholeness of all people here on earth, and we are to follow his example. We conclude that peace comes on the backs of people who work hard for a just world characterized by the well-being of all. It's not so much that peace has come to the world, but that we've been shown what we should do to make peace in the world. While this peace is connected to the material realities of life, we don't assume that Jesus has done much more than provide a moral example and inspired us onward. In response to our problem, we downplay the peace God promised in Jesus and emphasize the peace we pursue in the present.

The problem with these responses is they in their own ways have limited the fullness of the peace that has already begun with God's coming in Jesus. Neither of them fully capture the world-altering, personal-and-corporate-reality shifting coming of God. Micah spoke of the coming one as the one of shalom. Shalom is an all-encompassing kind of peace. It is peace with God and with humanity. It is not limited to the spiritual or to the physical. Nor is it bound to the distant future or by our work in the present. It is linked to personal well-being and to the wholeness, welfare, health, and prosperity of all people. The shalom that comes with the coming of God in Jesus is vertical and horizontal; it is cross-shaped; it is restored relationship with God and humanity, both now and in the age to come. At the heart of this robust vision of peace is the child of God who came through Mary's womb. At the center of this cross-shaped shalom is the God-man who entered our broken world and proclaimed and lived peace in the middle of humanity's messes. And when all death and hell sought to overcome his way, God transformed the cross, an instrument of violence (and of capital punishment at that), into the distinctive symbol of Christian hope and peace by raising the Prince of Peace in Easter glory.

And so we find ourselves at an impasse, trapped between the Prince of Peace we proclaim in faith and the world we observe by sight. Can we really say this kind of peace has come with Jesus, when everything around us from turmoil in interpersonal relationships, to murders on our streets and in our

schools, to warring between nations declares otherwise? Must we settle for peace that is spiritualized and placed in the distant future or for peace mostly dependent on our struggle for social good? What if there was another way? What if there was another way of seeing and knowing, of imagining and understanding, of perceiving and experiencing what God was enacting with the child in Mary's womb?

Let's call this the "inaugurated and coming kingdom" response. The birth of God's Messiah began a new and alternative kingdom—that is, a new world order, a new reality—that upset and displaced the realities of fear and strife, of oppression and bondage, of violence and war, of hunger and poverty, of scarcity and despair, of bitterness and brokenness, of loss and pain, of sickness and death. The foundation on which these things once stood has been irreparably destroyed. The coming of God in Jesus was and is history-altering and world-transforming. The inauguration of God's kingdom authentically changed everything even while leaving room for participation in and the final consummation of this new reality. Though we do not see peace in its fullness now, in Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection the arc of all history changed to bend toward God's kingdom of peace. Followers of Jesus are invited into a life where the truth of God's inaugurated kingdom guides our ways of being and doing in the world until God's kingdom is fully realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Unlike our spiritualized answer, this inaugurated and coming kingdom proclaims that Christ's peace is not limited to some individual sphere of spiritual feelings or experiences. The peace Christ brings is personal and social; it's spiritual and material; it's the cessation of strife between God and us and between us and others, now and in the age to come. Therefore, we're called to embody God's peace now and to strive in every way imaginable for its fullness in our lives and in the world around us.

Unlike the moral example response, this inaugurated and coming kingdom declares a reality beyond our material circumstances and greater than our combined efforts for justice might achieve. In Jesus, God has broken the chains of sin and fear and death, and freed us to be people who embody God's peace in new, surprising, and dynamic ways in our relationships with God, ourselves, and others. This means that while we strive for shalom for all people, we trust that God has worked and is working beyond what we see.

Before we get uncompromisingly behind this alternative response to our violent world, a word of caution is in order. We must not be too quick to embrace the inaugurated and coming kingdom view of reality because it requires much of us. It calls us to follow Jesus into places of darkness and death and, there, be witnesses to God's light and life that is already present. It calls us to share the truth about God's peace that we can't see in full and can barely see at all sometimes. It calls us to follow Jesus into spheres of relational and material poverty and, there, name and proclaim God's abundant kingdom. It calls us to stand against the powers and authorities of this world that assert their feigned control through coercion, deceit, violence, and war. And in our standing, it calls us to testify to love, truth, and peace. It calls us to live as if God were already in charge of our lives and of all things because, in actuality, God already is.

Let's return to Effie again. Of all people, she has reason to doubt. She has reason to accept a Christian response that limits Christ's peace or even to reject the child of peace all together. Because shalom has not come in its fullness in the world, Effie is not busy playing with her grandson or enjoying the infectious laughter of her daughter. Yet Effie spends her days and nights singing with Mother Mary of the work God has already done. In word and deed, Effie sings God's song of peace to those in despair and darkness. She journeys near and far to gather people to stand against domestic and gun violence and to stand with those who have experienced terrible and tragic loss. She journeys and sings, as Mary did, because she believes in God's promises and the work God has already begun. Effie knows that since Jesus has come, gun violence does not have the final word, domestic violence does not have the final word, fear does not have the final word, hate does not have the final word, death does not have the final word. In fact, because of Jesus their foundations are shattered and shattering. And because God has the final word, the whole of Effie's life proclaims that we can be people who give ourselves for the wholeness, restoration, and welfare of all humanity.

A child came and everything changed. Because of this, you are free to pursue God's peace in the midst of a world addicted to fear and scarcity and violence and war. In the middle of this world, God abides, and God's kingdom has already begun. And just as surely as this kingdom has begun, its consummation is coming. The one who once came as a child is coming again. And as we participate in the once inaugurated kingdom of peace, God's kingdom will come and God's will will be done in you and me until the kingdom reaches fulfillment in all the world. Amen.