Peace

Isaiah 9:2-7

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Peace. One, short word. Simple but not simplistic. Easy to say. Hard to experience. I couldn’t come up with a fancier sermon title, as they say here in North Carolina, for “ya’ll,” because peace is really hard to describe, yet it’s something we really want. Peace. We have the Peace Corps that engages in humanitarian work throughout the world. We hand out Nobel Peace prizes and engage in peace talks with the hopes of agreeing on a peace treaty. Walking down the streets, when passing by another, one may slightly lift the head to acknowledge a person and say “peace.” In a church setting like this, congregants may ‘pass the peace’ to one another at the right time in the liturgy. We speak the word and use the word but may never truly have it realized in our lives. A point of peace is difficult to reach. One word so hard to experience. Perhaps even in death, some may not be at peace.

There was a widow who had “Rest In Peace” put on her husband’s tombstone. But when she found out that he left her out of his will, she added, “Till I Come.” Others may not even be satisfied with where they find themselves in the end. In the columbarium at the Memorial Gardens of Duke Gardens an epitaph for someone who was laid to rest there reads, “I’d rather be in Cameron [Stadium].” We may say, “rest in peace” because that’s our hope but even in death some may not be at peace; they’d rather be at a Duke Men’s basketball game. Yet that phrase, “rest in peace,” also indicates that we may finally be at peace in death because it’s been so hard to achieve during life on earth.

This is not to say that we haven’t worked toward peace. Throughout the ages, many have worked toward peace via the weapons of war. War in the name of peace. Civil wars and world wars. Or as Walt Whitman writes in his 1862 journal, “O the hideous horrid hell of war.” He believed that “peace is always beautiful” but he knew that war was ugly and tragic no matter whose side you were on. There are no winners in war. We all lose in this tragedy and suffer under the agonistic weight of the world, the burdens clamped around our necks and pressing on our shoulders. You, who are veterans, know so much better than I do about the collateral damage that war can cause even as you selflessly serve your country—broken bodies, horrific memories, distorted minds. One is never the same after war and carrying the weight of a nation on your shoulders. The yoke, the bar across the shoulders, or the rod of the oppressor, seem to never disappear but are inscribed on one’s body forever—somatic memory. One may never seem to be able to attain the beauty of peace Whitman talks about but that doesn’t mean one doesn’t desire it deep down.

Take, for instance, poet Langston Hughes, who writes,

Give us a peace equal to the war
Or else our souls will be unsatisfied,
And we will wonder what we have fought for
And why the many died...

Give us a peace that will enlist
A mighty army serving human kind,
Not just an army geared to kill,
But trained to help the living mind.
An army trained to shape our common good
And bring about a world of brotherhood.

We go to war to make peace but war is not the means to the noble ends of peace. Peace is the means by which we can end war. Deep down in the crevices of our hearts we want peace. We'll talk ourselves to death in peace talks for years as in the Middle Eastern conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. Even now the U.S. is pushing for a peace deal. Why is it that attempts at making peace have failed? Maybe it's because we can't legislate the human heart.

We can't seem to get a hold of peace firmly. Just as soon as it appears to be inevitable, talks break down and the possibility of peace vanishes, slipping out of our hands. We can't capture it or control it. If we held it maybe we would make it into our own image bearing the weight of its possibility. But in our hands, peace is impossible because it does not come from us, ultimately. I know this may be a shock at a top ten research university that apparently now has a biblical book with its name, “the gospel of Duke” (ask me later!). We have a strong anthropology but perhaps a weak theology. If we try to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders something is theologically amiss and we may find our mental or physical health failing because peace on earth is not ours to carry. Peace is not for us to produce. Daily yoga marathons may produce peace internally, but it will not stop world wars unless everyone does yoga at the same time.

But we want peace. Instead of praying “give us our daily bread” we might as well pray “give us our peace” because we need this just as much. I can’t lie that I have great peace and quite a bit of satisfaction knowing that Duke beat UNC in football for the Victory Bell and we’re headed to a bowl game, whereas, the Tarheels will be watching Duke on TV at home. I’m not rubbing it in and I’m not talking about a game because life isn’t a game. People are burdened down by yokes, beaten by rods, and trampled over by trampling warriors. The weight of life is unbearable for many and many are prowling for peace, trying to relieve themselves of the weight of the world. So we’ll try anything. Fad diets like the Raw Paleolithic diet (just the name scares me) in which one only eats raw animals and raw vegetables or we’ll take a getaway cruise to the Caribbean during a harsh winter to get away from it all or undergo cosmetic plastic surgery for just the right look. These are our attempts to reach peace.

God’s response is totally different. God does not get away from it all. God comes to it all. God’s answer to war, bloodshed, oppression, death, and the weight of the suffering of the world is to be born into it as a child. A little child whose very nature is peace. This may be hard to believe when your child is going ballistic at 3am in the morning and you’re frantically praying, “give me peace!” A birth is God’s answer to death. Children are usually the vulnerable victims of war but in this kingdom, a child is the source and symbol of victory over violence. Not the biggest or the brightest or the most powerful but something so seemingly foolish is the wisest thing in the world, something so weak-looking is strong enough to usher in peace. Isaiah calls it “endless peace.” This seems too good to be true. But it is so true that is really good. God enters the human domain but does not follow human protocol toward the pathway of peace. God specializes in subversion because if we continue only doing what we know to do we’ll continue having wars and teenagers shot at their high schools. Our way does not work. God’s way does.

God chooses a child to be Prince of Peace to rule from a manger. An incarnate God in the form of a baby. “A woman shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel”(Isaiah 7:14). A child born a king who reigns in and with peace and leads a peaceable kingdom. This kingdom of peace is so hard to describe that we turn to poetic and prophetic discourse and say things like, “The wolf shall live with the lamb...the cow and the bear shall graze.” “...And a little child shall lead them”(Isaiah 11). Who would have thunk it? That a child is the bearer of our wildest dreams of peace. Our little leader. Just as a birth of a child is possible so is the birth of peace in the world. Christmas is about the possibility of impossibilities! Throughout the biblical narratives, the birth of a child signifies a new day dawning, breaking in with light while breaking the bonds of darkness. A child is a sign that there is a future and we have a future though not fully realized, but it has arrived
already in a lowly manger. The king has arrived but as one cartoon clip asks about the manger scene, “Where are all the important people?” The great Greek and Roman philosophers and rhetoricians of Western civilization—Plato, and Cicero, and Quintilian—were nowhere to be found, but the Christ child was born among animals and their excrement. Smelly. Vulgar. Frail. Weak. Helpless yet our helper because God is the manger (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). God comes in the form of a child to demonstrate that the peace we so deeply desire will only come through God’s power and not our own might.

The unsuspecting bearer of peace. A royal baby is divine opposition to powers of domination that weigh upon the world and is God’s way of weighing in on the destructive powers in order to loosen their grip on the world. The good news that the yoke of the burden, the bar across our shoulders and the rod of the oppressor are broken and all the boots and garments washed in the blood of war are burned draws us here. It’s good news because it’s true, which is why every year thousands upon thousands flock to kneel at the cradle of the world’s savior. It’s good because it’s the answer to our need for peace, incarnate peace, peace on earth. You came because you heard that a little baby was born wearing a crown and wrapped in swaddling peace. You came because at the end of the day, when the Christmas lights are turned off and the carols cease to be sung and the hot apple cider is finished and the children and dogs have gone to bed, you want peace on earth so you can rest in peace and be at peace with yourself, others, and God.

This child who is peace, brings peace in a distinct manner. He doesn’t lord his power over us, but he is Lord and lords and reigns for us. “For a child has been born for us.” He looks out for what is best for us and “authority rests on his shoulders.” He doesn’t rule or govern by tactics of domination that burden nations. He wouldn’t condone North Korea’s leader ordering the execution of his own uncle or the tyranny of Hitler or Mussolini. He doesn’t rule by fear or intimidation. He reigns on a throne of love and instead, he bears the weight of the suffering of the world on his shoulders. He bears our burdens that we might have peace. We no longer have to carry the weight of life on our shoulders. “Authority rests on his shoulders.” A child, a baby, does this for us, so that our burdens can be lifted and this child doesn’t buckle under the weight of the world. God chooses to be born into the world, yet holds it in his hands. Born as human yet saving humanity. Coming down as a child to lift up the whole world due to love because love will make you bear burdens. “Love bears all things” (1 Cor 13). His authority and pattern of governance is validated by his willingness to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. He came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). This God-child carries the whole world because he wants to redeem the whole world; therefore, no one is left out from the possibility of peace as he carries us.

He carries you so that you no longer have to bear your burdens. Grace, goodness, and peace don’t trickle down from God, but God through his Son, picks us up and places us on the child’s shoulders that we can finally rest and be at peace. “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). We’re his sheep on his shoulders because “Christ’s kingdom is not under his feet…it is on his shoulder” (Martin Luther). Redemption and release, peace, not repression. As we rest on him and in him, he carries us toward the experience of peace. And if we weren’t carried, we would certainly be crushed under the weight of the world.

Look at what the weight did to the Christ-child. He never cried or complained. The spiritual says, “He never said a-mumbalin’ word.” Though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders in a manger, it didn’t break the manger, but it eventually broke his innocent body on a cross. Communion reveals what the weight of suffering can do to you. It can break you and pour you out. But Jesus carried the weight of a cross that we might not be broken and actually experience peace, inside and outside, a real whole, in Hebrew, shalom. Jesus Christ, the little child, “born for us,” is the true peace corps. The cost of our peace broke his body into pieces, those little pieces of bread, the bread of life served from a cruciform manger. “He is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14), a whole and holy peace. Peace packaged in a prince wearing a crown of thorns when he’s born. May this child, this king, cradle you in his outstretched arms of Christmas peace even as he carries you on his shoulders, or really on his body in the manger, that you will no longer have to bear your own
suffering and finally rest in peace on earth. Peace. One word. Hard to describe but let me give it a try. One child. Jesus.

Let us pray:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (St. Augustine). On this Christmas Eve, let there be peace on earth even as we find rest for our souls. Amen.