

Advent 2010 Preaching Series: “Blessings of the Manger” – Part 2: “The Blessing of Peace – Being Peacemakers”

Matt. 3:1-12

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

Copyright: 2010, I. Peden

Second Sunday of Advent: December 5, 2010

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

We are in the second week of our Advent Preaching Series entitled *Blessings of the Manger* based on a study book with the same title by the Reverend Jeanne Torrence Finley. For this Second Sunday of Advent the author chose the title *The Blessing of Peace* which I have sub-titled *Being Peacemakers*. These topics were not randomly chosen but discerned by Finley after careful study of the Revised Common Lectionary readings for each week of Advent.

The Old Testament and Epistle readings for today describe ideals of peace and harmony. There is a stunning vision of God’s peaceable kingdom in Isaiah chapter 11. The prophet describes the ideal king from the Davidic line who would rule with justice and righteousness. This king would set right the things that were wrong, making sure that wrongs would be redressed, and the oppressor would be stopped. This vision of Isaiah was incorporated into the Hebrew people’s longing for the Messiah.

Peace would be a result of righteousness and the prophetic vision of the peaceable kingdom is that of the lion lying down with the lamb ...that fear and danger would be eliminated. Finley writes that we may be tempted to agree with Woody Allen’s comment on the peaceable kingdom: “The lion will lay down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep” ...a statement that reflects the continued inability of our world to achieve peace, and a statement that anticipates the second coming of Jesus when peace will finally be accomplished.

The Epistle reading for today is Romans 15:4-13 in which the apostle focuses on the need for unity, harmony, and peace within the Christian community. The apostle was writing to a relatively small community in Rome, but his message speaks to the church today. It raises the question: If we Christians cannot maintain peace among ourselves, what kind of witness will we be to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The Gospel reading for this Second Sunday of Advent is altogether another matter ...or is it? The reading from Matthew chapter 3 presents a picture of John the Baptist preaching that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near. Finley comments that it may be hard for us to conceive of the rough, loud preacher in the wilderness as a model of peace. “Yes,” I thought to myself,

“you are quite right, Reverend Finley, it is rather jarring and unsettling to have to consider the message of John the Baptist while considering the blessing of peace.” “After all,” I thought to myself, “he is hardly a quiet, calm, peace-inducing personality.” “What is more,” I said to myself, “I think he must have been quite terrifying. Or perhaps ‘unnerving’ is a better way to describe an overall reaction to John the Baptist.” He shouted out that there was an urgent need for change because the kingdom of heaven was drawing near. And I want to stress that the importance of John’s message was that it prepared the way for the kingdom he was preparing for. I want you to hold onto that thought because I will return to it shortly

Now let’s return to our topic, *The Blessing of Peace*. In Advent we contemplate the prospects of peace on earth and search for ways to be peacemakers. Peace with self, peace with others, peace with our world, and peace with God is not an idealistic dream. For God’s people, the peace we long for is already with us. It was ushered in when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...when Jesus came, inaugurating the kingdom of God which is a peaceable kingdom.

It is in this new reality of God’s peace that we live and move and have our being today. It comes to us by grace, not by human effort. As Bishop Will Willimon says, “It’s like standing in the midst of a summer shower, out under the bursting heavens. You are soaked to the skin, bathed with fragrant rain, chilled by its coolness and cleansed in its flow. It requires no plunging or diving to get at its wetness. It simply rains upon you. That’s the nature of this peace – as hard to achieve as it is to get wet in the midst of a summer shower.”

In Romans chapter 15 verse 13 the apostle writes as follows: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.” What is this peace that comes from God ...that God can fill us with? Quite simply, it is a peace that God has blessed us with through the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ – simply by standing in the rainfall of God’s grace. This peace the apostle is writing about is nothing more than a new and right relationship with God, with the world, with neighbor, and with oneself – a relationship God intended from the creation of the world. It is a peace that sets aside anger, resentment, retaliation, and attitudes of self-righteousness. It is an inclusive peace, not an exclusive peace . . . a peace that sets aside all social, racial, religious, gender, age, and class boundaries . . . a peace that transforms weapons of war into instruments of peace . . . a peace that changes enemies into friends . . . a peace that begins with faith in the

One who loved us so much that he was willing to lay down his life for us while we were still sinners.

It is time to return to the message of John the Baptist. You see, while we stand with God's grace raining freely on us and pouring God's blessings all over us, sometimes we put up umbrellas! We don't want to get a soaking of God's grace ...there is something that we are not sure about ...something we are ashamed of ...something we hate ourselves for ...something that was once in our spirit that has died ...something we think that prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God's grace and the "Blessings of the Manger." I am calling these "umbrellas" today to be consistent with the analogy created by Willimon. I think you know what I mean ...defences we put up ...barriers we erect from our side that stand in the way of being recipients of the love of God in Jesus Christ that has been so lavishly poured out for us and upon us. There are all kinds of "umbrellas" we put up at times in our lives to try to stay dry, or remain disinterested, or depressed, or even filled with despair. How strange and how complicated we humans are!

So another way to understand John the Baptist's message as a call to repentance, a call to make a fresh start, is to hear him saying: "Put down your umbrellas. Prepare yourselves for the fullness of God's love that is coming. You will receive an outpouring of God's spirit from the One who comes after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. When a baby was born in Bethlehem, the blessings that have begun to flow from that manger are inexhaustible, infinite, and free for all ...just like the rain that falls on all God's people. So, put down your umbrellas, look up, face this grace and goodness and mercy, and get soaked, get drenched with all the blessings from above."

"And today," I would add, "it is especially the blessing of peace that we need." In a world of terror and war, we want to experience the blessing of peace. The message on this Second Sunday of Advent is that through faith in Jesus Christ we have this blessing of peace, and it is not only the blessing of peace with God, but also the blessing of peace that encompasses all human relationships and surpasses all human knowledge. All hostility is gone. Walls of separation are torn down. Chasms of alienation are filled. Inner turmoil and outer antagonisms are removed. Enemies and strangers are friends. Any other peace we may seek in this world is tentative and costly. Any other peace is limited and in vain.

In a world of terror and war, we want real peace today. The only hope of finding real peace today, tomorrow and for eternity is in a personal, lasting relationship with Jesus Christ who says, “My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” It is the blessing of this peace that makes us peacemakers. The peace that Christians can enjoy now is not the peace of this world; nor is it a peace that the people of this world understand and appreciate. But it is real and tangible and transforms our whole experience of life in this world. God’s people – you and me – are called today and every day to accept Jesus’ peace and make it the content of our own peace. As the hymn writer put it in the words of that much loved hymn, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Or as St. Francis of Assisi expressed it in his much loved prayer: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.”

During Advent we reflect on our commitment to a culture of peace. Finley suggests that we “look for ways in which God is making all things new. We seek the places where God is bringing newness, and we join that work. Peace begins with us as we uphold values of fairness, justice, compassion, and non-violent resolution of conflict in our families and communities.”

Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” In a world of terror and war, God wants peacemakers to extend God’s blessing of peace in and through Christ to all God’s people. We have been given the authority of Jesus to do something about our world – beginning first with our own lives. During this Advent season, let us be drenched with the blessing of God’s peace in our personal lives, in our homes, and in our community. As peacemakers in partnership with Jesus, let us extend the blessing of God’s peace to include *all* people. Let us touch our world with love. Let us not be surprised if God changes us and changes our world in the process. May these holy days before Christmas be filled with God’s peace. And may the world know the blessing of peace before it is too late.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.