**Advent Two: Peace -** Isaiah 9:6-7. Luke 2:8-14. John 14: 26-27

Peace on earth.

It’s one of the most cherished sentiments of the Christmas season. It is written in Christmas cards worldwide, even the secular ones with pictures of pretty snowflakes and peaceful landscapes.

But, like all the best Christmas traditions, the phrase is inspired by Scripture, taken from the Nativity account in the Gospel of Luke:

*Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel, praising God. They said, 14“Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth*” (Luke 2:13-14).

It’s a well-known theme at Christmas – we read it, we say to each other, we sing about it. Yet despite being such a well-known theme, the angelic declaration of ‘peace on earth’ is commonly misunderstood, even among people of faith.

In the wider culture, peace on earth at Christmas is an expression of a more general desire for world peace. And world peace is much needed! We are living in a time when 174 countries around the world are currently in conflict, and this year in North America, over 41,000 people have been killed by gun violence.

Yes, we need world peace.

As well as an end to conflict, ‘Peace on earth’ is also thought to be about how we treat each other with kindness. During the last year of living through a pandemic, we have witnessed various acts of random kindness:

* in the beginning people delivered groceries to the most vulnerable.
* neighbors checked in with neighbors.
* we reached out to connect with people that perhaps we haven’t spoken to for a long time.

These actions have been encouraging. There is a sense that we are united and ‘in this together.’ A sense of peace and harmony.

And ‘peace on earth’ is also evoked in the traditions and the imagery of the season. Traditions like:

* good times with families,
* acts of giving to others like Project Good Tidings,
* outdoor nativity scenes with live animals and a baby born in the quiet winter

They all evoke a spark that humanity might one day live in peace and harmony.

And it’s a compelling vision for believers and non-believers alike.

But, is all this really what the scriptures mean by Peace?

Or does it somehow miss the scope and nature of peace as God intended?

What if the ‘peace on earth’ that we tend to focus on is more on what you might call a ‘horizontal peace’.

Peace as a result of people getting along with other people, either at an individual or a societal level - breaking down the barriers of selfishness, and ending the strife between people.

That would be good peace, yes!

But, ‘peace’ according to scripture is far deeper than that.

The peace that God offers is not a horizontal peace between each other, but more of a vertical peace between humanity and God.

It is about restoring our relationship with God.

It is about allowing God to heal us in the way that only God can.

It is about experiencing God within us.

This is the peace that Jesus came to show us. And it is the peace that was prophesied by Isaiah centuries before Jesus was born:

*To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and authority will be on his shoulders.*

*He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.* (Isaiah 9:6)

At the birth of Jesus, the angelic hosts weren’t just mouthing vague reassurances to the shepherds. They weren’t just saying “Peace on Earth” as a cliché to quell social or emotional unease. They were announcing a unique historical event – God had entered the world in the form of a human being, so that our relationship with God may be restored.

*14“Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased!* (Luke 2:14).

And please don’t mistake *“those with whom God is pleased*” as a scripture that includes some, while excluding others. God is pleased with all people, of all faiths and all denominations. God rejoices when anyone on their faith journey actively seeks a relationship with the Divine. Anyone who seeks to restore their relationship with God, will have peace through faith.

This is the message of peace that the Apostle Paul devoted his life to preaching. In his letter to the Romans, he reminds them:

 *… since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God* (Romans 5:1).

And of course, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, had a fair amount to say on the subject.

He often reassured his followers with the words, *“peace be with you,”* or told them to *“go in peace.”* These weren’t clichéd social pleasantries. They weren’t way of just saying ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye.’ They were an authoritative pronouncement of Divine Favor, always linked implicitly or explicitly to faith:

*Your faith has saved you; go in peace. . . . Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace* (Luke 7:50; 8:48).

And at the end of Jesus’ time on earth, just before his death, Jesus sums up the nature and the extent of true peace. Just incase his disciples were still unsure what he meant by ‘peace’, he tells them:

*Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don’t be troubled or afraid….. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.* (John 14:27; 16:33).

I find it interesting that several times in scripture the word peace is also coupled with the word fear. Could that be because when we do not trust in the peace that God can give us, then we can so easily become overwhelmed with the fears in this world. And there is a lot of fear in the world.

Theologian Diana Butler Bass writes:

*“Our cities and churches are full of people who are afraid — afraid of loss of their jobs, of income, of health care, of decency, of safety, of change, of pluralism, of ... of ... of ... The list of fears is nearly endless …has there ever really been a time in human history when we've not been filled with such fears?”*

Fear is normal.

The angels knew that it was human instinct for the shepherds to be afraid. Jesus knew that his disciples would be living in fear when he was gone.

But both offered something that was far bigger and deeper than fear – PEACE.

Not a horizontal world peace between each other, but a ‘vertical’ peace with God.

A peace that passes all human understanding.

The peace that Jesus offers is radically different from the world’s peace.

It doesn’t depend on circumstances or events in the world.

It doesn’t depend on human relationships.

In fact Jesus is not promising that the world will be without trouble and turmoil.

He is not saying that we will not ever live through a pandemic!

But what Jesus is promising, is that even traumatic world events, will pale in comparison to the peace that we can experience - when we seek relationship with God.

The Peace that Jesus offers depends only on our relationship with God.

If you ask a random sampling of people for a short definition of peace, the most common answers will likely be “the opposite of war” or “the end of hostilities” or something along those lines.

But the scriptural concept of peace encompasses far more than that.

The Hebrew word ‘shalom’ denotes not only peace, but also harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility.

It has an active sense of thriving and flourishing even in adversity.

Peace on earth won’t come through political or economic initiatives.

It won’t come through education, technology or even contact with space aliens.

The fact is, Peace on earth has already come.

It came with the beginning when the Divine entered the world through creation.

We were reminded again with the angelic fanfare at the birth of Christ.

We were taught the meaning of true Peace again and again in Jesus’ teachings.

And after Jesus left this earthly world, we were promised that the *‘Companion, the Holy Spirit,’* would allow us to experience this deep inner Peace every day.

This peace that is beyond the world’s understanding is with us here and now.

We just need to have faith and open ourselves to experience the Spirit.

Today, in this second Sunday of Advednt, we think of Peace at Advent, but the good news is that we can experience this ‘Advent Peace’, not just today, but each and every day.

And so, I end with the words from our candle lighting today:

Peace is calling out to all of us.

May we each find the Prince of Peace in the manger anew this Advent,

May we each be reminded that God is Peace.

And may we all renew our relationships with the Divine this season,

so that we can seek news ways of being,

today and always. Amen.