



Today we begin a series of three Advent messages titled *What the World Needs Now*. Some of you, when you hear the phrase *What the World Needs Now*, will think of the Burt Bacharach and Hal David song (am I dating myself?). I had been thinking for a couple of weeks about what theme to use for my messages during Advent, when one morning I had that song stuck in my head. It popped into my head, *that's a good theme for Advent – what the world needs now*. I'm not using the song in any way; just the title, and I will have three messages built around that theme – *peace, joy, and love*. These are all themes I have used before but, considering the state of our world, they are themes always worth repeating and they have, in many ways, been themes I have focused upon throughout the 37 years of my ministry.

We begin this morning with the theme of *peace*. To be honest, Advent is a very stressful time when you are a minister. I love Advent, but it is a time of many places to be, much to do, and not enough time to do it all, all of which is a recipe for losing any sense of peace. But you don't have to be a minister to be stressed out; I think we all are feeling a bit stressed these days. Are you?

Our Scripture text for today comes from three passages that speak of peace –

Romans 12:9-21 –

9 *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*

10 *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

11 *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.*

12 *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13* *Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

14 *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15* *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*

16 *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

17 *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.*

18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

19 *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

20 *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Isaiah 2:4 –

4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Luke 2:13-14 –

*13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

I want to consider peace from three different perspectives this morning –

1. Peace with humanity.

As I worked on this message the other evening I was listening to Christmas music, which always helps to bring to me a sense of peace, especially as I listened to one of my favorite Christmas song, *All Is Well*, by Michael W. Smith (the song will be part of the choir’s presentation today at *Café Noel*. You can listen to the original here – <https://youtu.be/yAypIzXmjVE>). Among the lyrics in the song are these lines – *All is well, all is well, let there be peace on earth*. What a hopeful phrase that is! Indeed, let there be peace on earth! What I find fascinating about the phrase is the word *let*. When I read that phrase, with the word *let*, I take it to mean that we need to stop resisting peace. *Let* is a permission-giving word. When we think about the state of the world, I believe it is clear that some of humanity has decided *not* to *let* peace take hold on the earth. As violence continues to plague us, as terrorism targets with absolutely no discrimination and becomes a growing plague around the world, as nations wage war, as sabers rattle and threaten more war, I think it is safe to say that humanity has, in large measure, decided *not* to *let* peace reign on the earth.

Genesis 4:2-10, which is the story of Cain and Abel, set the template for humanity, (*2 Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. 6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” 8 Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground) and that violence seems to be an incurable part of the human condition. We seem to find it inevitable that we are at war with one another. There is much in the news these days that would point to the possibility of even more violence in our world. Is war with North Korea on the horizon? North Korea says that nuclear war with the United States *is* inevitable. Is it? Will all the saber rattling lead to the inevitability of war? Will the violence of terrorism deepen? Will the Middle East explode into war?*

The world is armed to the teeth and pursues more arms, and as individuals we arm ourselves. The church now has a security task force and has met with a security consultant to help us determine what we need to do, in terms of security. It’s all madness, isn’t it? I’m not denying the sad, tragic realities of our world and the fact that we have to take certain steps, but it’s still madness, isn’t it? How hopeful do you feel about peace?

My first memories of war, and the struggle to attain peace, date to my youngest years. Two of my uncles were wounded during World War II, one at Normandy and the other at the Battle of the Bulge. One had difficulty with his leg the rest of his life because of his wound and I remember my curiosity

about it led me to ask my mom what had happened. She told me about the battle and went on to tell me about when families in her neighborhood received casualty notices, and how difficult those days were. I remember as an older child, in the early years of the Vietnam War, when we made prayer books in Vacation Bible School. Each one of us wrote a prayer that was copied so the prayer books contained a copy of each child's prayer. Though it was a long time ago I remember that every one of our prayers included the plea that God would bring an end to the war and bring home our friends and loved ones.

Paul echoes the words of Jesus in the Sermon On the Mount about loving our enemies. They are very tough words to live, because the fragile peace of our world instills in us a great sense of fear, and when we are fearful we do not respond from the better portion of ourselves. To read those words it is easy to think they are unrealistic, but really they are the only real hope we have for peace.

The famous words from Isaiah 2:4 – *He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore* – are inscribed on a wall in a park across the road from the United Nations. It is often reported that the words are on the foundation of the United Nations, but that is not correct. I wonder sometimes, are the words across the road because it keeps them at a safe distance, where they can exist as a great motto but not close enough to require the very, very difficult work of working for, maintaining, and keeping peace?

2. *Peace with ourselves.*

I'm going to go way, way out on a limb and make a statement this morning. Waaay out on a limb. I'm going to go out on that limb and say this – most everyone here would like to have a greater measure of peace in their life.

Actually that's hardly going out on a limb, is it? That's just a given in our world, especially at this time of year. We are all stressed out, trying to keep up with what we have to do, trying to get to everywhere we need to be, and feeling as though Christmas is a train that is bearing down the tracks closer and closer to us as we run harder and harder to try and stay out in front of that train. I told Tanya the other day that was how I felt, and maybe I should just sit down on the tracks and stop trying to outrun that train, except I don't want to get run over.

At Christmas, every worry is magnified, every family struggle more intense, and every personal struggle is felt more sharply. On top of all the other stressors, there is the sense of loss that rests heavy upon us this time of year. On the 1st day of this month my family marked 27 years since we lost my father. When my phone rings early in the morning – between 7:30 and 8:00 o'clock – I think of my dad, because that was the time he most often called. During Advent I cannot hear *O Holy Night* without thinking of him, as that was a song he sang in church during Advent, in his booming, beautiful tenor voice. This morning, we all feel the loss of Tom McAllister, don't we? Tom called, almost without fail, every Sunday morning about 8:15 to check on whether or not the bus had left the church to come and pick him up. I used to remind him that the bus drivers always knew to pick him up and that he would not be forgotten. I sure missed his call this morning.

Peace is certainly about peace between nations and peace between people, but peace is about ourselves as well, and the need we have for internal peace. *Do not let your hearts be troubled* begins the 14th chapter of John, words that we all need to hear and take to heart. In verse 27 of that chapter Jesus goes on to say *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

3. *Peace with God.*

The fear of the shepherds must have been very profound as they trembled before the angels. Luke reminds us on that night here was *suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on*

whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:13-14).

Peace on earth. Christmas is a great reminder of the peace we have with God. I grow very weary of those who want to paint God with a brush of great anger and vengeance, when clearly the gospel reminds us in unequivocal terms that God is love. God is love. We do not have to cower before God, we do not have to fear that God is anxious to condemn us; no, God’s desire is not to bring condemnation but salvation.

In our Scripture texts for this morning there is a universal declaration of God’s love – Luke says the angels proclaimed *on earth peace*. The angels didn’t say *peace on this country but not that country*. The angels didn’t say *peace on this group but not that group*. The angels didn’t say *peace on the people who believe this way but not that way*. It is disheartening, isn’t it, how tribal we have become. It’s always been that way, no doubt, but it seems to be growing ever more that way, and so many of those tribes want to claim God is with them but no one else. God’s desire is for peace to rest upon all people and he declares peace exists between divine and human because of his entering into the world as the Christ child in the manger.

(The following story is adapted from a story I first read on the internet, but I do not have the link to share, unfortunately. While much of the original language of this story remains, it is a slightly edited version of the original).

In the far west of England, almost to Wales, the medieval spire of St. Alkmund’s parish church reaches high above the old city of Shrewsbury. More than 600 years ago, a vicar of St. Alkmund’s named John Mirk wrote what became one of the most popular books in late medieval England as well as the most printed book in England before the Reformation. It was *Festial*, a collection of ready-made-sermons to be preached throughout the year.

One of the favorite sermons from that book was the Christmas sermon. In that sermon Mirk tells the familiar and comforting story of angels singing for joy, *Glory in excelsis Deo*, shepherds watching their flocks by night, and a baby lying in a manger while the city of Bethlehem sleeps nearby. The focus of Mirk’s sermon was Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Jesus came, he wrote, to bring peace to the whole world: peace between God and man, between man and angels, and among people.

When John Mirk penned this sermon, however, his world was far from peaceful. During Mirk’s lifetime (1348-1350), the Black Death wiped out approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of the medieval population. Plague became endemic to England, striking every few years until the seventeenth-century. Along with the plague came the many wars in late medieval England. Peace certainly seemed to elude medieval Shrewsbury. Peace was disrupted by plague and famine, it was disrupted by war, and was disrupted by many of the other problems of the day.

Yet, in the midst of it all Mirk wrote a sermon of peace. His words ring clear: *At midnight Christ was born, for then all things are at rest, thus showing that Christ is the Prince of Peace, and came to make peace between God and man, and between angels and man, and between man and man* (end of story).

Peace is one of the great themes of Scripture, and one to which we must continually look in order to find ways to make that great promise come true, because it is a promise. Peace is not just a hope, it is not just a command; it is a promise. One day – yes, one day – peace will come. Peace will reign in our world and in every human heart. It might seem a rather foolish idea to hold to that belief, but I believe it with all of my heart. I believe it because God has proclaimed it. I believe it because we worship Jesus, the Prince of Peace. I believe it because it is God’s will. I believe it because the angels proclaimed to the shepherds. I believe it because the prophets foretold it. And I believe it because, frankly, I need to believe it. I cannot give in to the pessimism that so easily threatens to overtake me when I look at our world. And so, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I will believe in peace, and will believe that peace will, some day, somehow, come to the earth.