

Christmas 2014: Peace Child

Week 2: The Paths of Peace

December 21, 2014

Welcome/intro

Last week we tackled an issue that many of us struggle with—we talked about ANXIETY

One of the challenges of this time of year is that all around us there's this image of perfect, holly jolly Christmas

But for many of us the holidays are a stressful and anxious time. Some of you have serious baggage from childhood around the holidays or Christmas

Others of you don't have childhood baggage but you're currently acquiring it! Some of you are picking up some new baggage as you feel the stress of this time of year

The truth of the matter is that many of us battle with anxiety or feelings of stress all year long and the holidays don't make that any easier, does it?

It actually just complicates the situation

And so we're taking this Christmas season and talking about the promises of peace that come with the birth of Christ

promises of peace are woven all throughout the Scriptures around Jesus—a strong and mighty peace

This peace that I hope and pray will cut through all the noise and static in our heads and hearts to bring a deeper, truer settledness and wholeness to our lives

And I think that we struck a nerve as I got more positive feedback on last week's message than just about any message all year long

Here, December 2014, we long for peace, don't we? Wouldn't it be nice to not have tension in your shoulders, conversations in your heads, or a stomach that's churning constantly?

Jesus is the strong and mighty peace child who comes to declare war against all the anxieties that threaten to over-run our lives and he invites you and me into his kingdom of peace here this morning

Last week we looked at one of the most powerful descriptions and prophecies of Jesus in Isaiah 9:

***² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;***

*on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned...*

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.*

This was spoken in Jerusalem to a worried and anxious king and a worried and anxious people
about 700 years before Jesus and like we said, for 700 years this promise hangs in the air as this child never comes

I don't know how good YOU are at waiting for promises like the promise of something very unhealthy waiting for you at the drive-thru at McDonald's
But even the most patient of us probably don't have 700 years worth of patience!

Especially since all during that time the people of Jerusalem are under the rule of foreign invaders, one after another—600 years of being a continually occupied nation

But this promise and this text continues to be a part of the hopes and dreams of at least some of the people of Israel

And today we're going to pick up this story and this promise as it's about to FINALLY be fulfilled

And before THIS child is born and before THIS son is given, there's ANOTHER son to be born who will go ahead of him

And this child's name is John the Baptist, and he's also prophesied in the book of Isaiah as someone who will prepare the way for this promised son to do his work

And in Luke where we get the birth story of Jesus we first get John's birth story.

Quick background to John's birth story—you've got an older couple, she's named Elizabeth and he's named Zechariah.

Zechariah is a priest who works and serves in the temple. And we get two primary descriptions of these two people: they're righteous and they're childless.

In this culture, to be childless was considered a curse from God. People assumed if you were childless you were also bad somehow, that you were being punished for your sins by being childless

But that's not the case with Elizabeth and Zechariah.

So in the story, just like with Mary, an angel appears and tells Zechariah that they're going to have a baby. Zechariah asks how can this possibly be—I'm old and she's old, we're past that stage of our lives!

The angel is a like, "Really, Zechariah? I'm Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I'm telling you what God's going to do! But since you don't believe, you won't be able to speak until the baby comes!"

So he's mute, Elizabeth gets pregnant, and John is born. And after John is born, Zechariah's tongue is set free and he gives us this word about who this boy is going to be

And who he is going to set the stage for. If you've got a Bible, turn with me to Luke 1:67—no Bible/free Bibles

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

***68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.***

***69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David***

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

***71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—***

***72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,***

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

***74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear***

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Now all of that is about Jesus—strange to start prophecy about your own son by talking about someone else's son! But that's how important Jesus is going to be

But notice again this promise of being without fear, all part of the promises of peace

And now he finally gets around to talking about his own son!

***76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,***

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation

*through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

My wife Kelly is like many of you and she loves BOOKS!

And she loves the library and has indoctrinated our children into love of the library

They make a weekly library run to get stacks of new books and when she comes home with her own stack I know that I won't be seeing her for a few days—I become a book widower until she's finished her new books

Last week she brought home something a bit out of the ordinary for her: “Open: an autobiography of Andre Agassi” who was a famous tennis player in the 90's

And she was telling me the story that Andre Agassi's dad decided before he was born that his son was going to be a famous tennis player

And so from the moment that he was born, he was relentless and even cruel to his son to whip him into shape and to force him to be who his dad wanted him to be

Of course you can imagine how completely dysfunctional this was
and how it completely messed up Andre Agassi to have this kind of pressure and expectation that all came from the outside

*176 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,]*

Zechariah here could be accused of doing the same thing—his son has just been born and he's giving him his marching orders as to who he's going to be and what he's going to do!

And all of this might be ruinous and simply another example of a dad trying to live out all of his own unfulfilled desires through his children

Except that all that he's doing is declaring and echoing what the angel had said to him earlier about what his job was

This baby has been given to this couple for this exact purpose and he's got a very specific and clear job description that Zechariah declares over him:

John's job in life is going to be to go ahead of his cousin Jesus, to give God's people the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins

*[78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.]*

And all of this is fueled by and rooted in this description of God located right in the middle of this passage: ***because of the tender mercy of our God***

Now we just talked about how Israel had been a nation under foreign rule and domination for over SIX HUNDRED years!

Like we said last week, this time, 600 years ago, Columbus hadn't even sailed the ocean blue yet!

And the prophets had declared that all of this foreign rule and occupation was because of Israel's sin—they had strayed from God and so God was disciplining them

And if you were a Jew living during this period and after all these years, the word that you might use to describe how God is relating to his people would probably NOT be tender mercy, right?

Maybe harsh, maybe severe, maybe angry, maybe relentless, maybe never satisfied, maybe you'd even describe his actions towards Israel as a severe mercy, a disciplining mercy, a hard mercy

but tender mercies is NOT what you've experienced is it?

But in the midst of 600-plus years of foreign occupation, Zechariah declares what we see as a theme throughout the Scriptures and that we've talked about before

That in this life, God's severe mercy always serves his tender mercies. Or to put it another way that we've said it before: every time God says no, his no is always there to serve his larger yes

In his severe mercy he has said an emphatic "NO!" to the sin and idol worship of Israel by sending in foreign countries to discipline them

And this IS merciful

it is all mercy and grace that God will not simply allow his people to run perpetually off the rails, further and further away from himself and from their true identity and true calling and purpose

It would be the worst possible thing that God could do to allow people whom he loves and created
to be with him to chase after all kinds of other gods made of wood and stone that would in the end only enslave and destroy them.

So in his severe mercy he corrects his people. And corrects them. And corrects them.

Question for you this morning: ever experienced God's severe mercy before?

Ever experienced life falling apart, things not working out the way you hoped, and realized that this was God, thwarting you so that you didn't go completely off the rails and far from him?

Ever experience God's severe mercy before? Any of you experiencing it right now?

It can create some anxiety, can't it?

In the midst of an experience of severe mercy it can be frustrating, painful, disorienting
and if we're willing to be honest about all the dynamics happening and entering fully in to all that's going on
it requires that we be honest about the fact that we've been chasing after all the wrong gods ourselves, all the wrong goals, and gotten wrapped up around all the wrong things

Coming to terms with that in the midst of God's severe mercy can be really, really challenging and anxiety producing to begin with

But if we're willing to walk the path of God's severe mercy and receive all the work and correction he wants to do in us, what we find is that his severe mercy always, always, always leads us to his tender mercy

His "no" to our old way of life is always and only there to serve the larger "yes" he wants to give us.

Zechariah declares that here and now, at just the right time for his people Israel
The severe mercy is coming to an end and tender mercies are coming, being poured out to his people

Salvation is here. Rescue is here. Forgiveness of sins is here. And that good news is alive in real-time for you and for me today

If you've never known God, never walked with Jesus, never understood and grace and mercy, never embraced it for yourself

But you're in a season of severe mercy or you're on a journey of trying to understand what this whole thing is all about

Then hear this good news: tender mercy has come. Forgiveness and salvation is here—reconciliation with the God who loves you and who made you has come and is being offered to you this morning

And if you're here and you're a Jesus-person who's in a time of severe mercy, in a season of struggling under the weight of God's "no" to something in your life

Then hear this same good news: tender mercy has come! Forgiveness and reconciliation and salvation is here!

For ALL PEOPLE: The YES in Jesus Christ has arrived to come and bring tender mercies and peace to bear!

And this YES that comes to us from God has a particular way that it's going to come, a particular package and a particular direction that it's going to lead us

Zechariah describes it this way:

***by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."***

Now, where have we seen words that sound something like "the sun come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun?"

Isaiah, 9, the passage we looked at last week!

***2 The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned...***

If you squeeze a lemon, you're going to get lemonade.

If you squeeze a college basketball fan, you're going to get their college fight song,

if you squeeze a grandparent you're going to get stories about their grandchildren and more than you probably want to know!

And if you squeeze a Jewish priest 2,000 years ago, he's going to give you Isaiah!

These guys would memorize scrolls and scrolls and scrolls of passages and chapters from all over the Old Testament, but especially Isaiah

And so here, Zechariah is picking up this long-awaited, unfulfilled promise from Isaiah 9 and saying “it’s finally coming true”

This child that will shine God’s light and bring God’s rule and bring us God’s PEACE is finally here

Zechariah picks up on the promise of peace that this child will bring and he echoes it

We talked last week about what the Hebrews meant when they used this word peace, the word is SHALOM and it’s more than just me and my own internal world

The word SHALOM means wholeness, rightness, flourishing in every conceivable way:

personally, politically, economically and financially, between peoples and people groups, among families and nations and between individuals and yes within our own hearts

and yes it includes our standing before an eternal and perfect and almighty God.

And it’s interesting that as Zechariah talks about peace, he talks about it a little bit differently in a different kind of metaphor than Isaiah did last week.

Isaiah talked about it in terms of a government and a kingdom that will establish a permanent peace

Zechariah talks about it less as a destination or finished place and more like a process or path, something we need to walk down

Jesus has come to lead us down the *path* of peace, to guide our feet down the direction and the way of peace

To experience this perfect shalom and wholeness that we’ve been talking about

Now what’s interesting about that is if I did a survey and we asked you if you’re *already* on the path of flourishing, peace, wholeness, to life being as good as it can get for you and for those around you that you love

We’d probably get one of three answers

A few of you might say “no and I don’t really care”

I know that I’m kind of on a destructive path either for myself and or for others and I’m kind of just doing my thing

and maybe I’ll get around to getting my act together at some other point

But for now this feels good and it’s where I want to be

Others of us WANT to be on the path of peace but aren't sure how to get there!

I'd LIKE this kind of path, I'd like to be walking in that life, but I can't quite figure out how to get to that place and stay there!

I was getting lunch this week with a really thoughtful person here in the church that I really respect a good bit

And he was sharing about kind of where he is in the big picture of his life and he sort of smiled a bit sadly

and said that he thinks the reality is he's his own worst enemy when it comes to living out the kind of life Jesus has for him

As we talked more about that, he shared that played out in two very different but related ways:

First, he's got some fears and baggage that are rooted in some old childhood pain that's still tripping him up decades later

And second, he's got this thing called pride that he trips over again and again—I told him I had no idea what he was talking about but I'd read books on the subject.

He's his own worst enemy when it comes to walking down this path of flourishing and wholeness

And I don't think he's alone, is he? In fact, I would suggest that as much as we mostly want to blame other people or circumstances for our struggles to get to a place of real peace and wholeness

Our real worst enemy or at least our most consistent enemy is simply ourselves!

Some of us want to get to this path of peace, of wholeness, where everything is finally RIGHT about how we're living and relating to just about everything but we can't quite figure out how to do this

Others of us might hear this question and shrug and say,

“Yeah, actually, I think I AM on this path where who I am and what I was made to do and how I relate to everything around me is working out...at least for the most part!”

But here's what happens even for those of us who think that we're generally on this path of peace and shalom that Zechariah's talking about

Every so often we drift off, don't we? Every so often we chase after something that looked shiny and bright and seemed to have lots of promise but it ended up leading us to a dead-end.

Every so often we trip over a big rock in the path or a root that's hidden in the dirt.

Every so often the paths of peace leads us down roads that we'd much rather not travel and so we'll kind of pause and scratch our heads and say

“are you sure that this is the right way to go? Surely there's a short cut or a way around this particular part of the path!”

The reality is ALL of us need someone to guide our feet down this path of peace all the way to the end because our feet are not so sensible on their own, are they?

And Jesus has come to guide our otherwise occasionally senseless feet into the path of peace

When my kids and I are at the State Fair, they're at the point where they've got more ideas about what they want to do and where they want to go

So occasionally we'll play the part of awkward tourists and pull out the map, find where they want to go, and then we'll chart a course to getting there

And if it's really crowded what I'll do is have them get in a little line-up with one of them holding onto the back of my shirt and then the next and the next holding on to the back of each other's shirts

As I lead us down the direction that we want to head

Jesus has come and opened up his map and said “I want to usher you into and lead you down through and into this glorious path of peace!

Will you let me be your guide? Will you hold onto my hand, my cloak, and let me guide you down the path of peace?”

A couple of important things that help us to think about what this path of peace is like and how we might walk it and stay on it:

1. Sometimes we have to fight for the path of peace

2014 has been a significant year for several people that I'm close to who have put a ton of time and energy into successfully walking through the process of a recovery program

And they will tell you that every single day it's a BATTLE: BOTH early on AND later on, it is a battle for recovery and wholeness

It is a BATTLE to stay sober and clean.

Every single day your flesh and your body is crying out for whatever it is that you've battled previously

and every single day there's the voice of the old addiction that's lurking and never completely silent

And so every single day you have to wake up ready to fight to stay on the path of health and wholeness and peace

My friends, every single one of us every day has the inner-voices that would call us to obey the wrong hungers and thirsts

that would lead to self-destruction and would cut us off from God and from other people

Scripture says that Every one of us is a recovering sin-addict.

The path of shalom is not weak, it's not soft, it's not always so warm and fuzzy

Sometimes the path of shalom and peace in these broken bodies and living in this broken world

requires that we put on our boxing gloves, roll up our sleeves, and go to battle fighting for it

It means having a hard conversation that you'd rather avoid. It means repenting of your pride and apologizing to someone that you've hurt

It might mean taking a serious moral inventory of your own life and your own actions

and admitting where you're in patterns that are self-destructive and destructive to other people

And then it means deciding that it is time to break that pattern

whether it be an addiction or a tendency to over-work or a tendency to try to control others or pride and vanity or co-dependence or independence

It means being ruthless with yourself when you'd rather make excuses or blame other people for your lack of peace

For some people throughout history, following Jesus in the path of his peace has meant that they see something that's wrong in the world and they can't rest and can't know peace until it's dealt with

Christians have fought the slave trade, fought for votes, built hospitals and orphanages and addressed issues of race and other brokenness in our world all throughout history

All because following Jesus down the path of peace meant that they couldn't rest as long as that problem still existed

So they went to battle as a part of walking this path of peace

Last week we talked about how part of moving from anxiety to peace about taking up dominion and authority where it is your place to take it up

There are some things outside of our control, but there are other things that God has given us the power and authority to make important decisions either FOR his peace or AWAY from his peace

Question for you this morning: ***where is your guide calling you to fight hard in his ways in order to walk his path of peace?***

That qualifier is important: it's not only his PATH we're walking, we're walking and even fighting to stay on this path in HIS particular ways

There are ways that you and I might be tempted to try to fight for the path of peace that might make sense to us but aren't His ways

Gossiping, back-biting, lying, cooking the books, blame-shifting, cutting corners, avoiding the hard stuff, and engaging in shouting matches

These are all actions that we sometimes do because we think that's how we'll get to the place we want to go!

We think of those as the short-cut or perhaps the only-cut to really achieving our goals of peace, wholeness, the life we want

But Jesus says "NO" to those ways, there are actions that do not belong and do not work on his path of peace

If you're not familiar with the way of Jesus

then before you start fighting it'd be important to study a bit under him and allow him to teach you what kind of fighting he endorses

And what it looks like to be a Jesus-follower walking down his path of peace in his ways.

Because when we try to walk down the path of peace in ways that violate HOW Jesus would call us to do so, it's like we hit our own eject button off the path of peace

The methods that Jesus rejects he rejects in part because they simply don't work—they don't bear the fruit of peace

Lying, gossiping, manipulating, stealing, blame-shifting, denial, avoidance and the like only complicate our anxiety, they do not relieve our anxiety

We often do these things because we think that they are viable options and short-cuts on the path to peace

but doing whatever the Bible calls sin only complicates our anxiety, it does not relieve our anxiety[REPEAT]

We often find ourselves in hard situations that we complicate with bad decisions—do not complicate the hard situation of life on this earth with more bad decisions!

Do not complicate an anxious or hard situation with a bad decision!

Instead, learn from Jesus as he takes us down the path of his peace, which sometimes means we have to go to work and fight, fight, fight for it.

Where do you need to take up your authority and go to work fighting to walk this path of peace, including in changing some of your own habits and behaviors?

2. The path of peace/shalom/wholeness requires greater attachment to the guide than to the sights along the path

While we're walking this path of peace, there will be many, many wonderful sights to see along the way:

houses, people, kids, jobs, vacations, all kinds of wonderful sights

And the temptation for all of us is to want to stop at a sight that we like, where we're comfortable

and to basically attempt to set up shop right then and there—to attempt to make a sight along the way our primary attachment.

And we kind of hope Jesus will stop here with us—Jesus, this place is great! Let's just stay here! I want to make my home here!

But walking the path of peace requires greater attachment to the guide than to the sights along the path

And sometimes the guide will give us a gift along the path that is wonderful and is ours for a long time—there's even a couple of gifts that are designed to be lifetime-type gifts like a spouse or a child

Although we know that in the pain of this world even those things don't always last

But the way that this path works and the only way that shalom is truly ours is if every sight and every gift is held more loosely than our attachment to the guide

We are called to hold the sights and the stuff along the way in large part because Jesus is simply better

He alone is the energy and power and source of the life we were made for and he alone can ultimately deliver it

BUT ALSO in part because everything we see and handle here is not yet whole, not yet perfected, not ready for us to be fully attached to them yet

It's like your house is under construction and it's only half or quarter done and you invite me onto the site and I say "this is great! I want to move in and stay here!"

And you say, "NO! Not yet! It's not done yet! I have dreams and plans for this place!

Don't get too attached to it as it is, because what it will be is going to be way, way, way better than what you see here and now!"

All along on both sides of this path of peace, there is one long piece of Construction Zone tape

Everything you see, everyone you meet, all of it is under construction, redemption, re-making, God's glorious re-making of all things

And any time our guide stops us at one of these construction sites, he does so in order that we might contribute toward the re-building and renovating of that site to participate in God's work of bringing wholeness and shalom to that person or place—NOT that we might become fully attached to it yet. It's not done! Our work is to help it along toward that end

The Scriptures say that ALL of creation was damaged when we introduced sin into the world

and ALL of it is undergoing massive re-construction, and when all is said and done we will have a completed, fully redeemed world to relate rightly to

The world is not whole yet, so we are called to hold it loosely

AND WE are not whole yet—we, too, are under construction, a redemptive work in progress

And one day when we're all finished and all of creation has been redeemed, THEN we will be in a position to relate rightly to all that we come in contact with as we follow Jesus

But for now, in this life, it's so easy for us to get more attached to the stuff along the way than we are to the guide, isn't it?

But what if this path and this walk became the primary way you understood what it is you were doing here on this earth?

What if you understood your whole life as walking the path of peace and wholeness and shalom on a *pilgrimage*?

And what if Jesus himself is your guide and your primary and really ONLY permanent attachment is to HIM

And what if detachment with love was your guiding principle as to how you related to all the stuff that you see around you?

We talked last week that part of walking in and experiencing peace is embracing our limits—being willing to not try to control things that are outside of our control

Peace comes in part as we embrace LIMITS TO our affections a part of living in the shalom of Christ

I am limiting my affection for stuff or people's approval or chocolate or sex or status or achievement or even my own freedom and independence in order to love something and SOMEONE much more

Anxiety is often the result of disordered loves and affections: being overly-attached to the stuff around us---good stuff! Just not stuff we're supposed to be stuck on yet!

Question: ***Where is anxiety the result of disordered loves in your life?***

I care too much about what people think. I care too much about specific outcomes in certain situations.

I care too much about finances or accomplishments

All of that is anxiety generating!

The peace of Christ comes as we walk this path of peace with Jesus

and staying on this path and experiencing this peace and wholeness requires a greater attachment to Jesus than to anything else we might be inclined to cling to along the way

3. We don't know what this path will lead us through

For some of you, this is the rub, isn't it? We don't know where this guide or this path is going to take us

The light has come and it shines in the darkness, but all it gives us is the two most important steps: the next one and the very last one

We get step 1 and maybe step 2, and then we get step 100, but steps 3-99 are all mystery

And for some of us, that's anxiety producing, isn't it?

And for some of us, we have a hard time taking ANY steps because we want to know we want to know we WANT TO KNOW—but here's the deal: NOBODY gets that information

None of us know what this path of peace will take us through, we only know two things:

1. We know where the path ends, that is, toward the kingdom of God, final redemption, home, beauty, glory, love, light, life forever and ever
2. We know that the one who leads us down this path is GOOD. HE IS GOOD! You can trust him. He is more trustworthy than you are, he is more trustworthy

My friends, as we celebrate Christmas this week there is good news. The peace child has come, he's come to guide our feet into the path of peace.

And my hope and prayer as we go into this week is that we'll let him! That we'll let him lead us and guide us down the path of peace

And sometimes we have to fight to stay on that path
and we regularly have to check our affections and put limits around how attached we'll get to the stuff that we see around us
and none of us knows what this path of peace will lead us through

And sometimes all of that presents challenges to us

But Jesus is the shalom-maker, the wholeness generator, the one who has come to make us whole, to lead us and guide us into the paths of peace
he is GOOD, and his whole point in coming is to BE GOOD to his children that he created and that he loves!

The light has come to bring wholeness and peace to all people! This week, we celebrate that together.