

**The God of Peace**  
December 8, 2013  
Isaiah 9:1-7

This is the second Sunday of Advent. Traditionally, the second Sunday of Advent is focused on “peace.” Hope, peace, joy, and love are the topics for the four Sundays of Advent.

Advent is a season in which we remember what it means to live in waiting and expectation. I remember being a child struggling with December. It was difficult to concentrate in school, it was difficult to behave at home, it was difficult to deal with the emotional anxiety of waiting. Christmas was coming, but I could not make it or will it to come any faster and sooner. We counted down the days. No matter how hard I wished, my wishing did not make time move any quicker. In fact, if anything, wishing for Christmas to come seemed to make it come all that much more slowly. It was painful. The longing was deep (at least as deep as I was capable of experiencing). I suffered greatly. Things would be right *only* when Christmas finally arrived. The explosion of energy of Christmas morning would set everything right and then my soul would be at peace. At least, that is what I thought.

**Context**

The book of Isaiah was written over the course of twelve generations that endured in the midst of suffering. Let me say that again: twelve generations. Not twelve days, twelve months, or twelve years – twelve generations are covered in the book of Isaiah. Our Scripture text today is early in those twelve generations: Christmas was promised but did not come quickly. Year after year, generation after generation, they waited.

The situation was not good for Israel. Throughout the time covered in Isaiah, the northern kingdom would be defeated by Assyria, the people would be taken into exile and never heard from again. The southern kingdom would survive a little longer; however, it, too, would be taken into exile.

Isaiah 9 comes before those two major defeats, but the danger was foreseeable. Two of the tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, had already been attacked. There were political reasons why Israel suffered defeat, exile and oppression as empires outside of Israel rose and became military powerhouses. Ultimately, those historical observations only answer how; not why.

Theologically, the reason *why* Israel suffered is revealed throughout Isaiah and can be summed up in one word: sin. As a nation Israel violated its covenant promises to God – over and over and over again – and finally God’s righteous judgment came. Isaiah proclaimed it, repeating the message given to him in the throne room of heaven,

**Isaiah 6:11**     Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:  
                          “Until cities lie waste  
  without inhabitant,  
                          and houses without people,  
  and the land is utterly desolate;

12     until the LORD sends everyone far away,  
          and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.  
13     Even if a tenth part remain in it,  
          it will be burned again,  
          like a terebinth or an oak  
          whose stump remains standing when it is felled.”  
          The holy seed is its stump.

At the time Isaiah spoke these words to Israel, Israel was entering this season of judgment. They held out hope God would save them, not realizing that it was God who was raising up the empires as an expression of judgment against them. The terrible irony in Isaiah is that the empires that arose to defeat and oppress Israel were responding to God's sovereign authority while Israel – God's chosen people – were the only people to *not* bend their will towards God.

The promise of God's peace came in the midst of God's wrath and judgment on Israel. And judgment was bad. It was harsh and unrelenting. It was not a spanking and then done. It was not a grounding for a week and then done. It was not a speeding ticket that Israel could pay, go to traffic school, and then done. Israel was in the hands of a just and righteous God who was unwilling to endure their faithlessness any longer. God was imposing a change.

In other words, we cannot get to the real meaning of the glorious sounds of the names of the promised child – “and his name shall be called: Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” – if we do not understand how bad things were. The promise was a vision of a new time, a new era, a new reality. The present judgment would be transformed. Circumstances would be different because of what God would do. The yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, and the burden of their oppressor would be broken.

The promise was peace, but the context was suffering and violence. Strange as it sounds to us, God's kindness was demonstrated in the midst of their suffering. In their suffering, they were driven to put their hope for peace in God's hands. And there – *there* – is where they should have been all along.

Paul wrote Philippians from prison. Prison was no picnic; he was a prisoner in chains. Yet, even in that personal condition, he urged believers to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say: rejoice!” From prison, Paul was living by putting all his hope for peace in God's hands; there, *there*, was the foundation of his peace all along. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Can we hear that?

**We do not have things as bad as Israel had it in their judgment;** even so, there are ways in their situation speaks to us. In my lifetime, we have not known the heavy hand of imperial empires oppressing *us*, but there are some in this congregation who remember well the world that endured Nazi aggression and communist totalitarianism. We remember the shock of the nation on December 7, 1941 – the Day That Will Live In Infamy – but we forget the uncertainty looking

forward into a time when the future was anything but peaceful. The outcome of World War II was anything but certain.

In my generation, we have not been seriously threatened militarily as a nation, yet we know we do not have peace. As a nation, we are so much like Israel in Isaiah's time. We pray for peace, as long as it is peace that conforms to our plans, our priorities, and our desires. We want peace on our terms. We see the dysfunction in our elected officials. We are exhausted from almost two years of pandemic bickering. We are exhausted from political battles and crises and scandals and problems. We are thrashed from reports of crimes and the ever-beating drum of amorality to which our culture is marching. How can we make this world a world of peace? It cannot be done.

**We are not in prison; even so, there are ways in which Paul's situation speaks to us.** Even the affluence of the United States, we cannot buy peace. It frustrates us. We think we should be able to get what we want if we are willing to spend enough, commit enough, or work hard enough. Instead, we feel the brokenness. We know suffering as individuals. As individuals, we see broken families, broken hearts, broken lives. Whether it is physical, financial, social, or political, we are suffering. Some of us are sick or debilitated. Some of us worry about making ends meet. Some of us are lonely, anxious, and tired. Some of us feel powerless and desperate about the direction our culture is taking.

Again, in a terrible irony, our lack of peace is evident in Christmas: it is a time of anxiety and a time of stress and a time of pressure and a time of obligations, but it rarely seems to be a time of peace. How are we going to get everything done and still have peace? It cannot be done. We long for peace in large part because we do not experience it.

The promise is peace, but the context was suffering and violence. Strange as it sounds to us, God's kindness is demonstrated in the midst of our suffering. In suffering, we are driven to put our hope for peace in God's hands. And there – *there* – is where we should have been all along. Welcome to Advent and expectant waiting.

## Peace

What is peace?

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is more than – and not even necessarily – calm.

Here, we have an advantage over the people of Isaiah's time. Where they had *the promise* of this child, we *have the recollection* of God's fulfilling this promise in Jesus Christ. We know peace is communion with God. It is living in the right relationship with God. Real peace means the barrier between God and us has been torn down and we are not estranged.

In chapter 9, the vision for peace was something God would accomplish for his people. "You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy." "For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian." How? God has done this through the birth of his messiah, his anointed one. "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

That is exactly what God did in Jesus. When we understand that God was working bigger than political situations, we can see how God has broken the bar of sin across our shoulders. We can see how God has reconciled us to himself – creating eternal peace with those who had rebelled and waged war against him. We know this in faith, and it takes eyes of faith to look through the current situation (the former times) to see into the full realization the kingdom of the Prince of Peace (the latter times). Peace means living within the holy presence of the sovereign God. In Isaiah 2, the promise is that the Messiah, “shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” We continue to hope for the fulfillment of this reality.

Further, we understand “peace” because it was a word Jesus used a lot. He was consistent in using it; peace was and is tied to faith. Those with faith in him know peace, experience peace, receive peace. Those who do not have faith in him experience his peace as division and the sword. If we look only in the gospel of Luke, we see a number of occasions when Jesus expressed peace as a state of being conferred on others:

- Jesus told the woman who welcomed him and anointed his feet with tears and drying with her hair, “Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:50)
- Jesus told the woman who could not stop her hemorrhage, who came up and touched his garment, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (Luke 8:48).
- When he talked about the end times and the division that his truth would cause, he said, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Luke 12:51) Those who receive him have peace; those who do not receive him have no peace.
- Talking about the cost of discipleship, he asked, “What king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.” Luke 14:32 God is sovereign and the most powerful; so, what are the terms of peace? Faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Remember this one; we are going to circle back to it.
- On Palm Sunday, as he rode into Jerusalem in triumph, with the people shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” (Luke 19:38) Later, he would rebuke the religious in Jerusalem for not joining in the praise, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19:42)
- On Easter Sunday, after hearing the testimony of witnesses to his resurrection, Jesus appeared in the Upper Room among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Peace is a condition of living in an ongoing and growing relationship with Jesus. Jesus is the way of peace. There is no other way of peace. “There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.” (Isaiah 48:22). The truth is: without Jesus, we do not have any peace. It is bumper sticker theology, but there is truth in it: Know Jesus, know peace; No Jesus, no peace. Without receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior, with seeking to follow him as a disciple, we do not have peace – we remain, in fact, at war with God.

Let me spell that out a little more: receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is our peace. When you confess with your lips Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10). “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5) Following Jesus guides us in the way of peace. Standing still, we do not have peace. Observing Jesus from a safe distance, we do not have peace. Blazing our own trail apart from Jesus, we do not have peace. Going our own way, we do not have peace. It is only clinging to Jesus who has claimed us, that we have peace.

Faith brings peace with God. Salvation is a gift of peace with God through grace. Communion brings peace by restoring things to the proper order. Jesus himself brings peace. He himself is peace.

### **Endless Peace Under the Authority of the Prince of Peace Is Not A Return To Our Nostalgic Past.**

Isaiah’s vision of the former times and latter times remains true today. We still live in an “already/not yet” reality. Jesus has come and will come again. The authority of the Prince of Peace “will grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.” What will that “endless peace” look like?

Many of the people in Isaiah’s time were praying for God to return them to power like they had experienced under King David and King Solomon. They wanted to be important in the world. They wanted to be in charge of their own destiny. They wanted to be the decision-makers and to re-establish what they thought were the good old days.

That was not the promise. That was not going to happen. God was promising a different, better vision and not a return to a nostalgic memory of the past. The book of Isaiah is a vision about two ages: “the former times and the latter times.” The vision looks forward through the present to a future God is creating different than what we see here and now.

What do we take from this? Isaiah’s Israel was a lot like America today. America is still a world leader; but we wonder if we have not spent ourselves into debt and the oppressive hands of rising empires. Once the moral leader of the world, we now wonder whether capitalism and freedom are going to lead us to a brighter future. Freedom of religion has become a celebration of secularism; in much of our culture faith in the one, true God is seen as something of which to be *ashamed*.

Many Christians long for the time when the church was respected. We want to be mainline again. We liked being important. We liked having influence over the culture. We liked being the decision-makers and we long to re-establish what we think were the good old days.

That is not the promise. That is not going to happen.

The promise of the child was that *he* – not we – *he* will have the authority resting on his shoulders. *He* – not we – *he* is named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The one who has come, the one who is to come, is the one to worship.

*His* authority shall grow continually. Until we live into the reality that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to Jesus Christ, until we understand that we are called to be *his* witnesses and *his* ambassadors, we will walk in darkness. God will accomplish his kingdom; the question is whether we will recognize the hope of the light that is dawning in the darkness?

The endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom will not be manifest in American military might, nor will it be found in continued consumer spending. It is not found in Sharia law. It is not found in human reason. Peace will be realized in the ultimate submission to *his* rule. That is better.

God will establish his kingdom. Jesus declared it, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the good news.” Our Advent prayer is the same as the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Our Advent prayer of hope is for Christ to return, “Come, Lord Jesus, come.”

### **Conclusion**

The promise is peace, but the context is suffering and violence. Friends, this [communion] table is the table of God’s peace. He is the all-powerful sovereign who establishes the terms of peace: faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

We come to this table to celebrate the peace God has made with us. It is a table where brokenness and estrangement are redeemed. It is a table where promise and fulfillment are revealed. Strange as it sounds to us, God’s power is demonstrated in the midst of suffering. Make no mistake: this table is where our peace with God was proclaimed in the midst of – and in the face of – Christ’s suffering. There is no other way; there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved; thus, we are driven to put our hope for peace in God’s hands through Jesus Christ. And there – *there* – is where we need to be to move forward.

“He will establish his kingdom and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” Even though we do not see it completely, we live in the meantime raising hope: “The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Amen.