

“The Gift of Peace”

Luke 2:8-14; John 14:25-27; I Peter 3:8-12

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How many of you have finished your Christmas shopping? You are putting pressure and guilt on the rest of us, you know that don't you? There are only thirteen shopping days left and trust me, most of us are counting.

Allow me to be a shopper's helper this morning, a role I am completely unqualified for and never thought I would assume, and suggest a gift you might want to give. The best part is that you don't have to fight traffic or stand in a checkout line to get it. You won't even find it advertised on QVC or popping up on your computer screen. However, everybody needs it and would appreciate it. It is the gift of peace.

The Bible says a lot about peace, including the birth narratives. When the heavenly host hovered above the shepherds the night they were told about the birth of the Christ child, they sang, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests” Luke 2:14. We have connected Christmas and peace ever since, as we should.

There are two things I would like for us to know about peace this third Sunday in Advent. **Peace is a gift that God wants to give us and peace is a gift that we need to give to the world.**

Travel with me to the Upper Room the night that Jesus was betrayed. Can you imagine the tension in the air as the dark clouds of danger swirled around him and the disciples? No doubt Jesus could see confusion and fear in their expressions as he talked about dying and leaving them. Surely this was why he calmly said to them, “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” John 14:27.

Jesus is still whispering those words of comfort and hope in restless hearts. Peace is a gift that he wants to give all of us because he knows how much we need it.

Perhaps this is the gift you need most this Christmas. Dark clouds are swirling around you, too, and you feel frightened and worried. Maybe you are struggling with the heavy burden of guilt or grief. Your anxiety and pain have caused you to withdraw from family and friends and you feel all alone.

God understands and like a loving parent, He cares. He wants to enter your struggle and help you cope with and overcome your challenges.

How can this happen? It is a process that begins with inviting God to join you on your journey. Just as Christmas is about God entering the world through the life of His Son, so must we let Him enter our lives through faith and trust in His son, Jesus. When we do, we find peace in knowing that we are not alone and will be given what we need each day to face life's struggles, challenges and temptations.

I am praying even now that you will respond to God's gracious offer to be your “very present help in times of trouble.” There is not a better gift you will receive this holiday season.

Not only is peace a gift that we need to receive from God, but it is a gift that we need to share with others. Restlessness is a trademark of our world. Anxiety fills the air, especially during this time of frequent terrorist attacks, war and economic instability.

How do we give the gift of peace to friends, family and all of humanity? We don't. Peace accompanies other gifts we give in Christ's name: companionship, compassion, respect, honesty, kindness, tolerance, understanding, sacrifice, assistance, generosity, encouragement, guidance and forgiveness. As I have read, “Peace is not the avoidance of conflict in proud isolation, but the desire to seek the highest good for others so they can enjoy life and all of its blessings.” It is in actively seeking and promoting others' well being that shalom or peace is realized.

On the other hand, peace is made possible as a result of things we refuse to do: deceive others, steal, and seek revenge or retaliation. When we refuse to abuse, exploit or oppress others for personal gain or pleasure we pave the way for peace. We make peace a possibility for all when we refrain from adding inflammatory rhetoric to explosive situations or defending inequality, which contributes to or ignores the misery of others.

The Apostle Peter helps us to understand this today. The words in I Peter 3:8-12 were penned during a time of persecution and great stress for the early Christians. Listen carefully as Peter describes things they should and should not do as followers of the Prince of Peace.

“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another. Be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with a blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good. He must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

In my Sunday School class last week, we studied Isaiah 9:2-7. In this passage Isaiah described a future leader as the Prince of Peace, a title attributed to Jesus and one that he embodied. This led to a question by one of the class members. “If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, why don’t we have peace on earth? When will he come and establish this peace?”

I told her that I thought answering the question would require that we rephrase it. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace and we are his followers, why haven’t we established peace on earth? Where have we failed him? What are we doing wrong?

Framing the question this way implies that I believe the potential for peace exists, and I do. We have been given instructions on how to achieve peace through Christ’s words, a model for achieving it through Christ’s life and the power to achieve it through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So what is lacking? Read the passage from Peter again. I believe he has given us a long list of Christmas presents that we can give those around us that will lead to “Peace on earth good will to men.”