

Jesus, Our Peace

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10, Col 1:21-23

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Morning Service

People of God: The Christmas season can be a difficult time of year for some, especially in terms of what we have made of it in our society. Some of us feel like Scrooge, saying, “bah, humbug”, to the commercialism of the season. As a pastor, whose duty it is to safeguard the religious meaning of the season and to warn against the dangers of consumerism, sometimes I feel as if I put a damper on all the gift giving that happens at this time of year.

On the other extreme, there are those who feel the pressure to do Christmas “just right”—to make sure the house is decorated properly, the cards are sent in time, and the meal just perfect—the pressure to do Christmas “right” prevents them from simply enjoying it.

For others this is a difficult time of year because of the short days and long nights. They find it hard to get going in the morning because it’s so dark and are discouraged when it gets dark so early. Then when we get gray dreary days—like we did earlier this week, instead of a layer of white snow, the depressing mood intensifies. So that there are days when you just don’t feel like doing anything, except maybe crawl back in bed.

Yet for others, Christmas is a difficult time of year because they feel the loss of their loved ones in this season when family gatherings are so important. The empty chair is felt acutely at this time of year. Others find themselves in hospital or battling disease that prevents them from enjoying Christmas as they otherwise would.

And so, for some, Christmas is a “blue” time of year. In recognition of this, some churches have a special service on the longest night of year, to acknowledge the difficulty some people have at this time of year. I suppose, this sermon, is my answer to the Christmas blues.

Because the message of Christmas, at its deepest level, instead of causing the Christmas blues, offers an answer to the Christmas blues. In

searching for the real Jesus, we can find meaning that goes beyond the superficial trimmings of this time of year; we can find the light that pierces the darkness of the night, and a sense of peace that offers hope in the midst of the brokenness of the world. The Christmas message is a vision of shalom, peace, the encompasses the whole creation.

After all, the biblical message is one that takes seriously the reality of sin, evil and brokenness in this world and in our lives. We don't have blinders on to the problems of our world. We don't gloss over the difficulties we experience in our lives. Instead, we recognize them in all of its dimensions.

In our personal lives, our sinful nature seeks to draw us away from God. Some struggle with addictions, most struggle with how to keep God front and center in their lives. In our extended families, there can be conflicts and or issues that divide so that the clan gathering is fraught with landmines. In our communities, we deal with the issues of creating sustainable jobs and safe streets. And in our world, the issues of debt, war, and the environment are high on the agenda.

The biblical message is one that takes the reality of sin, evil and brokenness very seriously. It is also one that tells how God is overcoming sin, evil, and brokenness through Jesus Christ. While humanity created the mess, God is the one who is cleaning it up. He is doing so through Jesus.

That's what Christmas so special. The birth of Jesus demonstrates the love of God for his people and for his world. God so loved that world that he have gave his one and Only Son—a Son, who is King, a Son who is fully God, but a Son who was born in a stable, with a manger for a crib, a Son who would wear a crown of thorns and die on the cross. And in his death and in his resurrection, Jesus would overcome the effects of the Fall into sin. Jesus overcomes the Christmas Blues, in a way that isn't superficial but long lasting.

That's expressed in the reading from Colossians in the word: "reconcile". In verse 22, we encounter the word reconcile in terms of our own personal relationship with God:

But now he [God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Even though because of our sin we have committed unholy acts, even though our character gives evidence of the "seven deadly sins", even though the law accuses us of our shortcoming, we can be reconciled to God. We can be presented, holy, without blemish, free from accusation—all because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Now this personal reconciliation is part of a broader reconciliation that God is working towards. It is one piece of a much larger puzzle. Verse 20 speaks about this broader reconciliation. We read (beginning at verse 19):

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood on the cross.

These verses paint the widest scope of God's work of reconciliation. It includes the whole creation. Notice how the result of this work is described: It brings peace.

Jesus is our peace. Peace with God, but peace that also affects the totality of our lives. Peace with ourselves. Peace with each other. Peace with the creation.

Now what Paul describes in analytical terms, Isaiah describes in poetic terms. In this 11th chapter of Isaiah, we have a prophecy that comes to fulfillment in Jesus. The opening verse uses the image a shoot that emerges from a stump to describe the renewal that will follow. Think about that image. A stump is something cut down. A tree whose leaves once provided shade, whose branches offered a place for birds to nest, a tree that was full of life is cut down. A stump. Useless. Dead.

But a shoot emerges. From the shoot, branches. From the branches, fruit. New life. New purpose. Jesus is that shoot. He is the branch. And part of his fruit is that he takes us, who are dead in sin—we who are stumps and gives to us new life, makes us into fruitful branches.

Isaiah continues to describe this Messiah figure in terms of righteousness and faithfulness. And then in verses 6 and 9, the result of the Messiah's righteousness and faithfulness is described. It's a picture of reconciliation and harmony, of peace, within the created order:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat the calf and the lion and the yearling together and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Let's linger over this scene, because it paints a picture of how indeed through Jesus Christ, all things are reconciled—even the lion and the lamb.

It's tempting to spiritualize this vision, to make it all symbolic of the reconciliation we can have God, of the peace we can enjoy with our Lord.

And there certainly is a symbolic element to this scene. It does paint a picture of serenity that captures an aspect of our salvation.

But we can't completely spiritualize this scene. It offers a concrete, down to earth picture of the renewal of creation. That this reconciliation, this peace we have in Jesus, involves the whole created order, including the lion and the lamb.

After all, in the days of Isaiah, the natural world could be a threat to God's people. In those days, lions and bears still roamed the countryside, and with just a staff or maybe a sword for protection encountering one of those animals could be quite scary. Mothers would worry about their children sticking their hands in the holes in the yard, which could contain a deadly viper. Or what if a scorpion crawled into bed at night and bit a young child? These were the deadly realities in the ancient world.

And this vision in which there will be complete harmony within even the animal world was a comfort to God's people. To envision a time when a young child can lead a lion as she would a little kitty cat, to know a viper could never harm anyone—well, that's a great comfort.

This vision of shalom within the animal world still resonates with us today. After all, even though we think we have tamed nature, nature can still get us. When I was out West, I've encountered a grizzly bear, while hiking in the mountains. Let me tell you, it raised your heart rate. Or I think of the dangerous creatures I met in Australia—I've just been going through my pictures on that trip just over seven years ago. I came within a few feet of the brown snake, one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. I was on a small pontoon boat that was attacked by a great white shark.

And so, I look forward to the day when I get hike without worrying about the bears, when I can swim without worrying about the sharks. I look forward to the day when I can live in complete harmony with the creation. Don't you?

That's the picture Isaiah paints before us: a creation in harmony, not just with itself, but also with humanity. It is this picture of peace; it is this sense of complete reconciliation that has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we have peace with God, peace with each other and peace with the creation.

Now it will take Christ's return to fully realize all of this. We do not fully experience it right now. But it is this vision of shalom that can sustain us in the midst of dark days. It is this vision that gives us hope. It is this vision that we can work towards, already now.

And so, may the real Jesus of Christmas, the one who reconciles us to God, the one who reconciles the whole creation, the one who brings this

vision of shalom, may this Jesus provide you with a more solid foundation to our Christmas celebrations. When Christmas shopping has gotten you tired, when getting together as a whole clan fills you with dread, remember this vision of peace. Take some time away from the hustle and bustle of the season and just spend some quiet time with the Lord. Be still before him, perhaps light a candle, or listen to some Christmas music. In a faced paced time, slow down and pause and remember what's really important.

May the light of Jesus pierce the darkness of these dreary, gray days that we have been experiencing. Let the Christmas lights we see, remind you of the light of Jesus. These dark days will pass, as soon the days will become longer. So too, the dark days of lives will pass and we have in Jesus hope for eternity.

And it is this long-term vision of shalom that sustains us when we feel the brokenness of this world. Yes, some feel that brokenness most intensely at this time of year. But the true message of Christmas offers hope in the midst of that pain. Perhaps its possible that those feeling that brokenness are really the ones able to hold on to the true of meaning of Christmas—because for them the superficiality of the season will not do, they need a better answer. They need the answer of a Savior who overcomes the curse so that one day the lion and the lamb will lie down together, with a child by their side.

Amen.