

Sermon – Christmas Eve – Holy Trinity, Valley Stream NY

Luke 2: 1-20

“The Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian.”

These words formed the opening of Dr Martin Luther King Jr’s last Christmas sermon delivered 51 years ago this Christmas. His message was delivered at the height of the civil rights era and in the midst of the conflict in Vietnam. This country was heavily divided and peace must have seemed an ideal out of reach to many.

It seems not a lot has changed in 50 odd years. We are reminded everyday that peace between people has been hard to come by. War and terrorism still impact our nation and relations between various groups in society are still fractured.

It was much the same in the time of Isaiah. War between nations and kingdoms ravaged the land, injustice existed as one group of people exploited another and many people were oppressed. Kings came and went but very few delivered peace for their kingdoms. For the majority, hope existed only in the prophetic voices that proclaimed that a God anointed savior, the messiah, would be born from David’s line, one of the few benevolent and faithful kings.

The messianic dawn is heralded in Isaiah’s prophecy. No longer will the oppressed people live in the darkness of despair. A light is coming to shine on them. The light is the light of freedom and peace that will come in the form of a new king, a king like they have not known before.

A child is to be born on whom all authority rests and who is to be named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.”

The feast of Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus the Christ, the very same child that Isaiah named as Immanuel (God is with us), and who was born of Mary and Joseph in that dank manger in Bethlehem. Jesus was born so that God could be amongst us and relate to us as a fellow human being. He carried with him the promise and hope of a nation that he might come as the messiah to fulfill the promises of God.

Together we share in this very human moment, the act of being born of a woman, carrying the hope of others as we emerge into the world and take our first breath. It is an act that binds us together as humans because no matter to whom you are born, you have been born just as Jesus was born; naked, crying, and needing immediate nurturing.

The announcement of the birth of a baby is generally a joyous occasion and cause for celebration within the family. How many of you though have experienced an angel standing before you declaring the birth of someone's child? This is what makes the birth of Jesus just that little bit different from each of us.

Can you imagine being those shepherds? Frightened does not begin to express the emotions they must have felt to be confronted by an angel in the darkness of their hillside camp and then having a multitude of heavenly hosts all praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those that he favors!"

When the shepherds visited Jesus and told Mary of their miraculous encounter she treasured their words and pondered them in her heart. Mary already knew she was carrying a special child but these words brought by the lowly shepherds seemed to resonate and bring her a deeper sense of peace that the prophecy of the angel Gabriel had been fulfilled.

The peace that was promised in Isaiah's prophecy and in the proclamation of the angel is not an indiscriminate peace, rather a peace that flows to those who are accepting of his birth as the messiah, the prince of peace. For it is in accepting Jesus that we come into his kingdom and, like Jesus' authority, we grow continually, and this brings us peace.

The true peace that comes from Jesus expresses the nature of salvation as the restoration of good relations between God and ourselves, and the consequent reception of God's blessings. When we make the decision to accept Jesus and turn back to God, to amend our lives to more reflect how Jesus taught us to live, then we open ourselves to his powerful healing and the blessing of deep inner peace.

Peace can at times feel very elusive. Even as faithful believers the many setbacks and difficulties of our human lives can upset us and destabilize us to the point where peace seems far off. How do we find peace when our family members are at odds with each other? How do we find peace when our newborn might have died or become very ill? How do we find peace when our child has been incarcerated or our family is traumatized by mental illness?

Well, it is through belief that Jesus, as the incarnation of God, will bring peace to our hearts and hope to our lives so that we are able to face these difficulties together. We are not immune from life's troubles however our faith can strengthen us to endure through them.

Jesus' life, indeed Mary, Joseph and all of Jesus' friends were not immune from pain and suffering but they carried the hope that was born with Jesus that his birth heralded a new time, a time that would lead us to a new beginning and a new sense of being at peace in a world that was, and will always be, full of challenges.

The light that came into the world at Jesus birth is a light that shines in the world today for us. We both radiate God's love for the world and receive the light of Christ. Peace

and restoration of God's intended relationship with us will only come when we surrender to the little child who embodied it all. We then become the teachers for the world and the custodians of Christ's peace. The world looks at us and wonders why we are so peaceful. Maybe someone has recognized that quality in you. We can tell them that a baby changed our lives.

Our world today seems just as tribal and conflicted as it ever has been. One group of people seems to want to scapegoat others. Another group wants to bully the one who is different. All this happens because we can't seem to accept that we are indeed interdependent and interrelated as God's creation. As the apostle Paul says to the Romans, "there is no distinction between Jew or Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him."

Dr King said in his Christmas sermon "if there is to be peace on earth and good will towards all, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations."

It is our gift to the world to live our lives grounded in the moral foundation established by Jesus Christ. As God gifted us God's-self in the form of the baby Jesus, we gift to the world the light of Christ, the love of Christ and the hope for a peaceful heart as we tend the vineyard that is our lives.

On this Feast of Christmas as we remember the birth of this baby that came into the world and changed it forever, may you find peace in your hearts and hope for a better world.

I wish each and every one of you a blessed Christmas and a new year filled with a deepening sense of the presence of God in your lives.

Amen