

**... AND A TIME FOR PEACE**  
**Sermon, December 23, 2018**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**Texts: Micah 5:2-5, Luke 1:39-55**

This morning we light the fourth Advent candle, the candle of Peace. As mentioned on previous Fourth Sundays of Advent, the Hebrew notion of peace is somewhat different from our contemporary understanding. *Shalom* is a wonderful word that means completeness, wholeness, health, soundness, tranquility, fullness, harmony, as well as the absence of agitation or discord, all wrapped up in one word. We, however, tend to think of "peace" simply as the last part ... the absence of conflict and discord. As a result, we tend to think we can attain peace simply by doing anything we can to avoid conflict. We don't like conflict; we don't like arguing; we don't like discord ... because, well, we want peace. However, avoiding conflict doesn't really create peace; in fact, more often than not avoiding conflict simply encourages us to ignore problems until they erupt, blow up in our faces and become crises ... crises which usually aren't very peaceful. The biblical notion of peace, shalom, is much more proactive. Shalom is a noun, but it implies action ... it is sort of a verbal noun, if there is such a grammatical creature. Shalom carries the connotation of **making** things right, taking steps to set things straight, working to make and keep things whole and complete and healthy and sound and tranquil, and keeping a careful guard and watch for those things which disrupt peace. That shalom-making process can be, and in fact usually is, initially disruptive.

The Old Testament prophecies were of One who would come and proactively establish "shalom," This proactive Prince of Peace, this Ruler, as foretold by Micah, will come out of Bethlehem in the strength of the Lord and set things straight, He would come to bring and establish wholeness, holiness completion, justice, right-ness! His reign would never, ever end. The prophet Micah proclaimed that when He comes, "... *He will be their peace.*" Their *shalom*. It was a wonderful promise and hope; a wonderful vision! As we'll read tomorrow evening from Isaiah, "*Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, THE PRINCE OF PEACE. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from the time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this.*" (emphasis added)

But there was a problem that first Christmas. There was already a ruler over Bethlehem, one who was already known as the King of the Jews. Interestingly, he was also known by the Romans as the King of Peace, not just the Prince of Peace, for he had kept the peace in that troubled region of the Empire for some four decades by the time Jesus was born. The King of the Jews, the King of Peace, was Herod the Great. We don't often see this part of the Christmas story portrayed in pageants, but the birth of the Prince of Peace sparked a conflict, a bloody atrocity of state-sponsored terrorism, as all the male children under two years of age in Bethlehem were slaughtered by the King of Peace as a peace-keeping measure! The family of Jesus became refugees, fleeing to Egypt. That first Christmas, I'm sure there was more brokenness than wholeness, more hurt than love, more grief than joy. But I think Mary and Joseph knew this was nothing more than a dark chapter in a story that was not yet done being written. The great story of shalom begun in the arrival of the Prince of Peace will endure, of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.

The entire Christmas narrative time and again vividly and repeatedly depicts a general principle: and that is the entry of the Prince of Peace into our world inevitably creates some conflict. Jesus Christ not only solves problems, His arrival in our lives can also initially create lots of problems, difficult situations, major adjustments, strained relationships. Just ask Mary! And Joseph! "Accepting Jesus" into their lives created major upheaval for them. And Mary's Magnificat is just full of the imagery of conflict ... good conflict, to be sure, but nevertheless real conflict. The scattering of the proud with His mighty arm, the bringing down of rulers, the lifting up of the humble ... these are all divine fightin' words! The arrival of the Prince of Peace does bring shalom, but it also creates strife. Even Jesus Himself said, "*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*" With apologies to Leo Tolstoy, Christmas is about War and Peace. *Christianity* is about War and Peace! Christmas means that when the Prince of Peace comes there is going to be a fight.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, does bring peace, yet He also brings conflict. True Christianity brings both peace and strife. It's a lot like love. Love brings peace and strife. You'll remember the words of that familiar passage from Ecclesiastes 3:8 ... "There is time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war and a time for peace."

*(Just as an aside, some have wondered about the apparent mixed message those words seem to imply, but it really isn't a mixed message ... e.g., if you really and genuinely love someone or something, well, you'll hate those things that might harm or hurt your beloved or your relationship to the beloved. So much more could be said on this, but that's another sermon.)* Now, you can have a lot less strife in your life if you never love. To paraphrase a familiar C.S. Lewis quotation, if you want to keep your heart from being broken, don't love! Lock your heart in a little casket of selfishness! Don't hope in anything, don't give yourself to any cause, don't give yourself to anybody, don't care about anybody, don't love, don't hope, and to some degree, you can have a pretty calm life and you won't have any strife or hurt. You'll have a pretty *dull* life, but a calm one. Sure, my life would have been remarkably calm and free of strife if I never fell in love, if I never got married, if I never had children. Think of all the money I would have saved. Think of all the sleep I wouldn't have missed. I wouldn't have known the grief and pain of widowhood, the sadness and heartache of loss. And neither would I have known the incredible joys and the heights of contented happiness I've known as a husband and a father. If I had it all to do over, the only thing I would have done differently is I would have married my wife a whole lot sooner.

Here is the C.S. Lewis quotation in full: *To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable. Impenetrable. Irredeemable.*<sup>1</sup>

When you love Jesus, when one commits to a life of faithful discipleship to Him, one does get a wonderful new sense of peace, but one also gets a whole new level of strife. When the Prince of Peace enters your life, when you make a serious effort to identify with Him, to live as He would have you live, a whole lot of silly things that used to bother you won't bother you anymore, and a whole lot of things that never bothered you before will begin to, as you start to gain His perspective on what's important and what isn't. There's both new peace and new war. There is a new peace of conscience, as your conscience is assuaged by His gracious and quieted with the assurances such as *"there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* But He also brings new strife. The reason for the fight, the reason for the strife, is that there is now a new king in your life. Your ego, your old self, your old desires ... these "rulers" are no longer to be on the throne.

When the wise men came to Herod, they didn't come and say they were looking for a personal savior. They didn't say, *"We are looking for someone we can come to with our needs and he'll meet those needs; we're looking for someone we can come to with our problems he will help those problems."* No, they said, *"We have come looking for the one who has been born KING."* That's what stirs things up in Jerusalem. That's what causes the Herodian reaction. When a king comes in where there is already a king in charge, there is going to be conflict; there is no room in any realm for two kings. Jesus didn't just say, *"Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest."* He did say that, but He also said things like, *"Unless you deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Me you cannot be My disciple."* In short, Jesus didn't just say, *"I'm your Savior;"* He also said, *"I am your king."* Because of that, there's this fight. That's the reason for it. *"Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king."*

One final thought. And if we are associated with Him, we will face conflict, we will be persecuted. Even the members of Jesus family become refugees, not just Jesus. And we are His family. II Timothy 3:12 promises, *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* To be sure, in His earthly lifetime people were attracted to Jesus and others were absolutely out to kill him. At a much lower level, that's what we experience as well. In other words, if we're always being persecuted then something is wrong, but if we're never being persecuted, something is wrong as well. *"Yes I speak up for Jesus; yes, I always stand for the truth and I'm always being persecuted because of Jesus."* No, probably not. Jesus wasn't always persecuted; He was also incredibly attractive. If we're *always* being persecuted it probably means that we might be rude and self-righteous and insensitive. No, Jesus wasn't always persecuted; He was also incredibly attractive; people flocked to Him, invited Him to their homes for dinner, brought their children to Him. On the other hand, if we are *never* being persecuted, that means something is wrong, as well. If there is no fight, we are not in the battle. In short, if we're always being persecuted ... unlike Jesus ... or if we're never being persecuted ... again, unlike Jesus ... then we're unlike Jesus. The Prince of Peace attracts and repels, and so will His faithful followers.

Christmas is about proactive peace, shalom, about **making** things right, about working hand in hand with the Prince of Peace taking steps to do what we can in His grace and power to set things straight, fixing things and working to make things whole and complete until that glorious day when the zeal of the Lord of Hosts will fully accomplish this ... and peace shall reign forever and ever.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3058-to-love-at-all-is-to-be-vulnerable-love-anything>