

***Sermon Series: "Receiving... Peace"***  
***Salem United Methodist Church***  
***Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:16-25***  
***December 7, 2014***  
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In the church Advent precedes the birth of Jesus. It is a time to prepare for his coming as we remember his birth, as we experience him in our lives today, and as we wait for his second coming. Advent means to arrive. We are to prepare to receive Jesus when he arrives and wait to receive him when he does arrive. This time of Advent coincides with our culture's pre-Christmas buying rush. We focus on giving just the perfect gift. However, before we give, we must be able to receive. What are we waiting to receive? How will we receive?

We sing the words at Christmas, "O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, The silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light. The hopes and fears of all the years. Are met in thee tonight." These words sound so peaceful. As we sing them we envision a picture of the quiet night with a star shining over the quiet, sleeping Bethlehem. But there are two hints in this verse that all has not been quiet and peaceful. There is darkness and fear. The town is filled with people who are afraid. They have been summoned back to their home town by the Roman Governor to be counted. These immigrants are afraid of what might lurk in the dark corners of this town. It is not a joyous celebration. We could change the words to say, "O little town of Ferguson, We want to see thee still. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the protestors raid the streets. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the fires burneth bright. The hopes and fears of all the years are lived out here tonight." Our nation is not experiencing peace right now. There is fear and prejudice being lived out in riots and protests. Both citizens and police officers are afraid and ask, "What if I do something wrong? What will happen? How will I be judged? Will I lose my life?"

And all this is raising its ugly head at a time in which we hope for peace at Christmas. Then there is the unrest that many of us feel during these weeks preceding Christmas. There is so much to do: the baking, decorating, shopping, wrapping, social commitments, eating, expectations of making this a perfect Christmas which equals to stress, stress, and more stress. In addition, many don't feel any peace as the darkness of winter descends. We are reminded of our loved ones who won't be with us this Christmas. We mourn for those who have died. We grieve over shattered relationships. We remember the drinking and fighting that occurred in Christmases past. Christmas is not always serene, quiet, calm, or tranquil, neither are our lives. We fear what tomorrow may bring. We are anxious that everything we strive to do will implode on us or explode on others. We are both afraid and anxious about letting others down. Peace? We often feel anything but peaceful at Christmas. Where is peace? How long must we wait?

In both the settings of our scriptures today, the people were waiting for peace. In the Isaiah passage, King Ahaz, the king of Judah, has heard that kings of Israel and Syria are coming to dethrone him, because he refused to join forces with them. They want to put an ally on the throne. King Ahaz is more than anxious. He is frightened for his life when Isaiah gives him this sign from God. "Don't worry. No matter what happens, your lineage will continue. God promises that a young woman will have a son and call him Immanuel-God with us. Those two kings will be long dead before this child is born." I'm not sure how much peace King Ahaz received from this sign. If he listened closely, God was not only talking about the future birth of a prince, but also that God was present with him. The early church soon recognized this Immanuel to be the promised Messiah, Jesus. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew draws many parallels between the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus as the Messiah. He begins his Good News about Jesus with his genealogy. Matthew dips back into history to the time of Abraham to show the world that Jesus had human connections, a human history. Matthew draws this lineage through King David, too, because the Messiah was to come from David's lineage. In this first chapter Matthew outlines that Jesus is both human and divine. His genealogy is the human connection. The story of the annunciation to Joseph is his divine connection.

With the story of Joseph, Matthew gives us his version of the birth of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the divine agent in the conception. The Holy Spirit is, also, the divine provider and protector of the Messiah who is to be born of Mary. The conception of Jesus is scandalous. Mary is engaged to Joseph, but as was the custom, engaged couples did not live together. Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant and he knows the child is not his. Can you sense the fear and anxiety welling up in Joseph? He's asking himself, "Who could have done this to my beloved Mary? Or how could she do this to him?" The law stated that a woman caught in an adulterous

relationship could be killed, but Joseph could not bear it. He planned to dismiss her quietly. Can you imagine the village gossip? Can you imagine the sideways looks given to Joseph as he walked down the street? But the Holy Spirit who had given this child to Mary assures Joseph through an angel that all will be well. He explains that this child is the one that Isaiah proclaimed. He is to be the Immanuel, God-with-us. And he is to be called in Hebrew, *Yeshua* which means God saves. Joseph receives this comforting news in a dream. The Holy Spirit transformed his fears and anxiety into peace. Joseph becomes the protector, provider, and father to God's Son, the one who will save us from sin.

These two stories remind us that life gets messy. Things happen to us which are out of our control. Or we can put a lot of pressure on ourselves to prepare the perfect Christmas in an imperfect world. And in the process we become emotionally, physically, financially, and relationally exhausted. Nothing seems to go right. Our nerves are on edge. Our plans fall apart. A fight ensues. Someone gets upset and storms out. Or the unexpected happens. There is an accident, a diagnosis, and/or someone dies. There is a broken relationship, or a pink slip is delivered. One person stated that they thought if they followed Jesus, he would fix all the broken things in his life, that Jesus would solve all his problems. But Jesus didn't. He wondered, "What was the point of following Jesus?" Jesus didn't come to wave a magic wand to make everything better. Jesus came as the incarnation of God. He came as God in the flesh to live among us, to be with us, to teach us, to die for us, and to rise from the dead. We believe in Jesus because in his death, he offers us mercy and in his resurrection, he offers us hope. We believe in Jesus because as a divine being who lived a human life, he understands our pain, our suffering, our conflicts. We believe in Jesus because he gives us strength for life's messes. Jesus offers us peace in the midst of conflict, and gives us hope in despair. We follow Jesus because he shows us how to live. Jesus can bring us peace when everything seems to be in disarray.

How do we receive this gift of peace? What are the practical steps to receive this gift from the Prince of Peace? Henri Nouwen listed four essential elements that he called a "spirituality of peace-making." 1. "Peacemaking requires a life of prayer." Being connected, being in a relationship with Jesus offers us a peace that goes beyond human understanding. Even in our busy-ness, we can make time to connect with the Prince of Peace. 2. "Peacemaking demands ongoing resistance to the forces of violence." This may mean resisting the temptations to create a perfect Christmas for everyone, or it may mean resisting being involved in any kind of fighting or abuse whether verbal or physical. 3. "Peacemaking necessitates community." To build community whether in families or neighborhoods requires forgiveness and acceptance. None of us are perfect. We all say things and do things that hurt others whether we are aware of it or not. Forgiveness and reconciliation are steps toward making peace. 4. "Peacemaking requires living and working among the poor and the broken." When we give to those who have less, when we bless those who are in need of a blessing, we will receive an unexpected peace. Did you notice a progression in these steps? It begins with God in prayer. The next step is about our relationships with another. Then peacemaking extends to the community. And the final step goes beyond all these to caring for those in need.

Peacemaking requires patience and so does waiting. When we think our Christmas couldn't get any worse, remember that Joseph felt the same way until an angel showed up. He was told that all would be well. Like Joseph, we are to wait for the Christ Child to come. We are to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. We are to wait with open your hands, minds, and hearts to receive the peace Immanuel imparts. No matter what happens to our preconceived notions about the perfect Christmas, the Prince of Peace shows up, Immanuel, God is with us. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

**Reflection Questions:** How are you making peace this Advent? How are you receiving peace?

**Resources:** *All I Want For Christmas* by James Harnish; *The Birth of the Messiah* by Raymond Brown; *Christmas is Not Your Birthday* by Mike Slaughter; *Not a Silent Night* by Adam Hamilton; *The Road to Peace* by Henri Nouwen