***CHRISTMAS PRAYERS: GRANT US PEACE!***

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Texts: Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:67-79

“*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days…[H]e shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”*

 In those words, spoken by the prophet Micah centuries before Jesus’ birth, Matthew found the promise of Jesus’ coming among us as the one of peace. For century after century the people of God had waited and wondered when this son of Bethlehem might come and bring to them that peace. What happened in those intervening years while they waited for “the one of peace” to come? The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, never to rise again. 150 years later the Babylonians came rolling in to the southern kingdom of Judah, sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and carried the best and brightest of the people off into exile. Fifty years later when Cyrus permitted the people to return home from exile, peace did not return with them. Alexander the Great came sweeping through, followed by the Ptolemies from Egypt, and then the Seleucids from Damascus who demanded worship of Greek gods. The Maccabees revolted in 167 BCE and were able to rule in Palestine for about a hundred years as the Hasmoneans, but their empire began to deteriorate, and so another bigger and badder empire stepped in – the Romans. The general Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 BCE and Herod the Great ascended to the throne in 37 BCE under Roman rule. Seven hundred years after the prophecy of Micah the people were still waiting for the coming of the “one of peace” for there was no peace. And then he came.

 He was born to peasant parents in the little town of Bethlehem on a silent night without much notice from the world apart from a handful of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night and a trio of wise men still journeying from a distant land under the direction of a new star. Thus arrived “the one of peace”, except that there was little peace upon his arrival. He was still a tot when he and his family were forced to flee their home and become refugees in Egypt as a disgruntled and frightened Herod put to death all the two-year-old Hebrew boys he could find in hopes of ending the life of the one born “King of the Jews”, the one Micah called “the one of peace”. When the boy returned from Egypt his homeland was still under Roman rule, and so he grew up under the Pax Romana – the Roman Peace which offered little peace to the people of Israel.

 As an adult he found himself in constant conflict – the people of his hometown tried to throw him off a cliff, others were ready to stone him while still others would have made him king. His message of love and peace was met with violence – with a whip and a cross and a tomb. But the tomb could not contain him, and he rose from the dead, telling his disciples, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.” Surely then the reign of peace would begin! But as the last two thousand years have brutally showed us, there is still little peace in this fractured world in which we live and for whom he came. The list is far too long to recite, but includes a host of wars among and within nations – including two World Wars – and many more skirmishes; it includes ethnic cleansing and a Trail of Tears and a Holocaust. It includes Crusades and the Inquisition and killings in Northern Ireland, all in the name of the “one of peace”. It includes lynchings in the South and beheadings in the desert and the tumbling of the Twin Towers and gun violence in this nation that is now as likely to cause death as a car accident might. It includes such threats to an Augusta County teacher trying to offer her world history students a basic understanding of a world religion through a calligraphy exercise that school has to be cancelled for the safety of the children. It has been 2,000 years since the coming of the Prince of Peace; where then is the peace?

 In 1863 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow addressed that question in a poem under the long shadow of the Civil War (or the War Between the States or the War for States Rights or as a woman in Richmond referred to it to me, “the recent unpleasantness”). Longfellow writes:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day*

*Their old, familiar carols play,*

*And wild and sweet*

*The words repeat*

*Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

*I thought how, as the day had come,*

*The belfries of all Christendom*

*Had rolled along*

*The unbroken song*

*Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head:*

*There is no peace on earth,” I said,*

*“For hate is strong*

*And mocks the song*

*Of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:*

*“God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!*

*The wrong shall fail*

*The right prevail,*

*With peace on earth, good will to men!”*

 In the promises of God Longfellow found hope for the future in the midst of a peace-less present, hope pealing in the bells of Christmas, hope born in a manger stable. But is that peace only for the future? Where is the peace in the present since the coming of “the one of peace”? A little over a hundred years after Longfellow Martin Luther King Jr. raised that question in a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Christmas Eve, a sermon that seems every bit as relevant today as then. Here is what he said:

*Peace on Earth….This 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 goodwill toward all men can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don’t have good will toward men in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power…. If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we are all going to perish together as fools….*

Is it possible that the peace of God that comes to us in “the one of peace” is not a peace imposed upon us, but a path to peace laid out for us, a peace that asks of us participation and faith and obedience? Jesus tells his disciples that the peace he gives is not a peace like the world gives – an absence of violence imposed by brute force like the Pax Romana under which they lived. His peace is a different kind of peace, a peace grounded in love for God and love for one another – a peace that is within us but also among us, a peace that is not just the absence of violence but is true shalom that embraces health, well-being, and prosperity as well as harmony among people. If so, then the plea of the song “Let There be Peace on Earth” is right – “let it begin with me.” Let it begin with what WE do and where WE are and the choices WE make. Let it begin with our first steps on that path to peace laid out by Jesus, a peace that in the words of Mary’s Magnificat – lifts up the lowly and brings down the powerful – so that all are on equal footing. Let it begin with our work for justice and our commitment to righteousness and our love for neighbors that are intrinsic to God’s peace.

 We should not expect God to impose peace upon us, for that has never been the way God chooses to work in our world. God works through us and with us and, when necessary, despite us. God uses us as instruments of God’s grace, love, healing and hope. Why should peace be any different? Perhaps that is why Zechariah’s song says poetically of the coming of the Savior:

*By the tender mercy of our God,*

*the dawn from on high will break upon us,*

*to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

*to guide our feet in the way of peace*.

The Savior guides our feet, doesn’t stamp all over them and force us to march to the tune of his drummer. He ***guides*** our feet, but we still have to pick them up and put them down on that path upon which he guides us.

 Lee Hinson-Hasty tells of going with his teenage son to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and seeing “The Civil War and American Art” collection. Among the hundreds of paintings they saw was one entitled, “Fire of Leaves”. “Look,” his son said as they stood at the painting. “The two boys have laid down their coats. One is a Confederate; the other Union. They are huddled together…” and then it hit Hinson-Hasty what had caught his son’s eye and he finished his son’s sentence, “…and they are building a small fire.” “That’ll preach,” said the teenage son. And what does it say? The teenage son elaborated, “The two boys were in the wilderness and there was a long path ahead of them. They recognized the only way they were going to find their way out and back home was to work together.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Perhaps that painting showed something of the path to peace upon which Jesus guides us –

a path that is shared, not one we walk alone,

a path that demands we set aside our differences in order to work together,

a path that finds with “the other” common humanity and common needs.

Perhaps we might pray, “Lord, lead us on that path to peace!” and in following that path, we may find the answer to our prayer, “Lord, grant us peace!” Amen

1. Lee Hinson-Hasty, *The Presbyterian Outlook*: September 16, 2013, pp.11-12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)