***PRAY FOR PEACE!***

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Texts: Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:46-55

Each year Karen and I receive a multitude of Christmas cards from neighbors, family and friends from across the country and around the world – and I suspect you do as well. There are cards from folks in our hometowns, college classmates, family friends in Scotland, church friends from past churches, and cards from some of you. Many of the cards include notes that bring us up to date on the lives and travels of the senders, some of which would compete with *The Chronicles of Narnia* in length and adventure! A few years ago, Grif Bonham (notably without Betty) sent a Christmas letter ostensibly from Alaska, detailing his adventures with a pack of sled dogs in the Iditarod! Most of the notes are a little less epic and more factually accurate! The cards vary widely – some are collages of family pictures or at least pictures of the kids, some are decorative holiday letters trimmed in holly, and some are traditional cards offering holiday greetings. Apart from family well-wishes, the most repeated refrains are expressions of Christmas joy and prayers for peace. As we recall each week in the lighting of Advent candles, this is a season of joy and peace, hope and love, as we make our way toward Christmas Eve when we light the Christ candle in celebration of the One whose birth heralds the promise of all those longed-for gifts: hope, love, joy, and peace.

However, it appears that not all folks share those same sentiments this holiday season. I read recently that U.S. Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky sent out a Christmas card this year showing his entire family, including his wife and four children, posing with assault-style weapons and offering this cheerful holiday message: “Merry Christmas! P.S. Santa, please bring ammo.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Apparently for Rep. Massie, the path to hope, love, joy, and peace has nothing to do with the birth of the Christ-child and more to do with a well-stocked gun cabinet and family armory. Is that the peace that Jesus came to bring us?

Throughout Advent we hear the voices of prophets telling of the coming of one who, in the words of Micah that we heard this morning, will be “the one of peace.” Isaiah says that the child born for us will be called “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*”, and his peace embraces justice and righteousness. The prophet paints a vivid image of the peaceable kingdom which God will bring about, a kingdom in which natural enemies – the wolf and lamb, the leopard and kid, the calf and lion – will all live together in harmony, and “a little child shall lead them.” Absent from all those glorious prophecies are descriptions of any assault weapons or any other weapons with which God’s peace will be established. What in God’s name could God have been thinking in entrusting the peace of the world to the vulnerable baby Jesus instead of to Rep. Massie and his well-armed family!

In *A Christmas Sermon on Peace* delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Christmas Eve 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offered an insightful response:

*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 good will toward all men (and women) can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don’t have good will toward men (and women) 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…The leaders of the world today talk eloquently about peace...They are talking about peace as a distant goal, as an end we seek, but one day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What Dr. King captures is the essence of that promise of peace on earth as lived out by the Prince of Peace. Peace is not the *Pax Romana*, something to be pursued through violent means. Jesus refused that path as a Messiah who would call in the heavenly host and kick out the Romans to establish his throne. What Jesus showed us is not only what the peace of God is about, but how it is to be achieved – through love of God and neighbor including all our neighbors – our friends and family, but also those neighbors who are strangers to us, our enemies, and those who make life difficult for us. Peace is not just a goal toward which we strive, but a way in which we live along the way.

The peace of which Christ speaks is, in Paul’s words, a peace that passes all our understanding; we seem so narrowly focused on the world’s understanding of peace and how it is best achieved – through violence – that we fail to understand what Jesus is telling us and showing us about the peace of God. In the coming of a vulnerable child in Bethlehem, born to a poor, peasant mother, God turns the world upside down and right side up. The peace of God is not something imposed by the rich and powerful; it is not just the absence of violence in a world that perpetuates the status quo; it is a peace that comes about through change that embraces the kind of justice of which Mary sings in her Magnificat:

the proud are humbled,

the powerful are brought down from their thrones

and the lowly lifted up,

the hungry are filled with good things

and the rich are sent away empty.

Peace without justice is not peace! And the justice of which Jesus speaks, the justice of which Mary sings, levels the playing field so that all people have their needs met and are deemed worthy of love and respect.

Several weeks ago I received a letter from Glen Early who is the pastor at Columbia Furnace United Methodist Church in Edinburg, VA. I do not know Rev. Early, but included with his letter was a picture of a shabbily dressed man, his head wrapped in a bandana, a man I recalled meeting in worship here one Sunday morning. Rev. Early’s letter explained:

*I attended your 8:30 worship service on Laity Sunday, October 17, and found it to be a warm and pleasant experience. I just pray that our churches would be as gracious as Covenant Presbyterian was.*

*For quite a few years I have worked with folks who found themselves without a home. I was always amazed at how they were able to adapt to their situation. I wanted to experience for myself what it would be like for a homeless person to walk into a strange church. I wondered what that would feel like.*

*I selected your church at random and prepared myself by letting my beard grow, dressing in my old work clothes, and appearing to be unfamiliar with what was going on. The folks in the vestibule were very welcoming. They gave me a bulletin and told me I could sit wherever I liked. Before the service began you came down the aisle and introduced yourself. I enjoyed the testimony of your lay speakers that Sunday.*

*I wasn’t sure what to expect. That’s the reason I undertook this “adventure”. I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised and gratified that the Holy Spirit is present within your congregation. While I was dressed this way and sitting in your beautiful sanctuary, I somehow felt unworthy to be there. Your Church let me know it was OK for me to be there and I am very grateful for that. Blessings to you, my friend.*

That letter offered a glimpse of what the peace of Christ looks like – a world in which everyone is welcomed and has a place, a world in which grace is extended instead of judgment, a world in which every person is valued as a child of God who is created in the image of God. That letter warmed my heart and brightened my day, for it spoke of our living into that vision of the peaceable kingdom – at least a little bit of it – as we follow “the One of Peace.” Among the Great Ends of the Church in our Book of Order, the last, and perhaps most daunting, is: *the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*. By that we mean that the world should look at our lives and life together as the church and say, “*So that is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like!”* That is who we strive to be!

As you pray for peace this Advent season, may it be the peace of which the prophets spoke, peace that passes our understanding, peace that looks like the Kingdom of God, peace of the child born in Bethlehem who comes to the world out of God’s great love for the world. Pray for that kind of peace in our world, but also in your heart. Last week I quoted Diana Butler Bass as saying: *Gratitude is about ‘me,’ and it is about ‘we.*’[[3]](#endnote-3) The same might be said of peace: Peace is about “me”, and it is about “we”. For the world’s peace and our peace are entwined, and the one who shows us the way on both counts is the one Micah calls, “the One of peace”, the one whose birth we prepare to celebrate, the one of whom angels sang: *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all God’s people on earth!* Amen

1. “Three forgotten words explain America’s recent troubles”, Will Bunch, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 11, 2021, p.WB-2 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “A Christmas Sermon on Peace”, Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr*., James M. Washington ed., HarperSanFrancisco:1986, p.253 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-3)