

“PRINCE OF PEACE”

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-20 John 14:25-31

I can remember the climb, step after step, higher and higher, until things below seemed small and far away, and I was at the top just looking over the sights. And then I sat down and let myself just glide down the hill on my sled. In that first moment, as I began to move, there was a wonderful peace. It was short, but it was sweet, for it was peace. And then the downhill slide gained speed and excitement, the rush of joy and the thrill of freedom ran through my whole being like electricity until I was at the bottom of the hill and still going. And then I was so charged full of energy that it was easy to say, “I’m going to do that again!” And then the climb, step after step, back to the top of the hill!

Christmas is like that.

Clench your fists. Tighter. Tighter still. Make your whole body tense as you strain your muscles... and then... relax. Let peace come to you. Let there be peace.

Christmas is like that.

I think the reason there is so much of a sense of peace at Christmas is because some of the days that lead up to it are like the struggle to climb a steep snowy hill. It’s because there’s a tension that’s finally allowed to ease. There’s an excitement that’s built into Christmas Day... and, a release. And the tension is welcome because it’s like being pulled between the urgency of getting ready and the wonder of surprise. Christmas is a time when there are secrets we’re keeping and joys that are hiding in such a way that we tend to be ready to just bubble over until all is revealed. It’s hard to master the calm exterior that is able to wait without shaking the packages labeled for you.

And yet, there’s a peace we can find at Christmas that makes it so special. It is more than what comes when the struggle is over. It is more than an easing of tensions. And it’s more than the knowledge that soon we’ll return to simplicity again. Too often, we define peace all too narrowly. First of all, peace is not just the absence of war or the end of the battle or a cessation of violence. A man who had served in Viet Nam shared once about having been pinned down during a skirmish, unable to see where the enemy might be and unable to do much to fight back. Helpless. He waited in anguish just guarding his position. When the shooting stopped, he held his breath until he heard some words of command. They were English. The voice was his CO. The skirmish had ended and he said that then he felt a sort of peace come over him. Such a peace is more a mixture of relief and a freedom from fear or anguish. Real peace is much more than relief. You can know relief and still have enemies. Real peace would include an absence of enemies, and not just by eliminating them either, for real peace would include an absence of guilt. Real peace includes being able to say that there are no enemies! ...that sides have been reconciled. And there is a peace that comes to us, at some time in our life, when even death is no longer an enemy.

Peace. *“To us a child is born, to us a son is given... and His name shall be called... ‘Prince of Peace.’”* (Isaiah 9:6) *“Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth...”* (Luke 2:14)

Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives.....let not your hearts be troubled.”* (John 14:27) Paul said, *“Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6-7) *“Thou dost keep them in perfect peace whose minds are stayed on Thee.”* (Isaiah 26:3)

E. Stanley Jones, in his work, *Growing Spiritually*, spoke of how

“The third fruit of the Spirit is peace... First, love – love is preeminent; then joy – joy comes as a result of love; and then peace – peace is joy grown quiet and assured. Joy simmers

down into peace. Joy is peace with its hat in the air, and peace is joy with its arms folded in serene assurance.

“Let us get one thing straight,” Jones says... “The using of God to give us peace of mind and to make us healthy is a species of self-idolatry which is very prevalent and very popular – and very shallow. It makes God serve us instead of our serving God....

“The phrase *peace of mind* in itself reveals the shallowness of the quest. You cannot have peace of mind unless you have something deeper than peace of mind. When you have peace at the depth of your spirit, then peace of mind is an outcome of that deeper peace. You cannot have peace in the mind if there is conflict in the spirit. You yourself, in your essential make-up, must be a harmonized person. Then and then only will there be peace of mind.”

There are two reasons why the peace of God is beyond human understanding. First of all, we don't easily understand how to keep our minds stayed on God. We don't understand how in *everything* by prayer and supplication *with* thanksgiving we can make our requests to God. Part of the problem is that we want to take credit for meeting at least *some* of our own needs. And part of the problem is that we take our minds off of God and God's will and we tend to think about ourselves and our own wills. And maybe, part of the problem is that we are too quick to settle for a peace that is not *perfect peace*.

The prophet Jeremiah, in a call to accountability, spoke of the pride, the greed and the falsehood of those of the people of faith who had become so self-absorbed that they had forgotten God and how to serve God. He says, “*They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace! Peace!’ when there is no peace.*” (Jeremiah 6:14) There is no peace but perfect peace. And Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. Peace is a Christian reality. Any other sort of peace is less than perfect.

The second reason why the peace of God is beyond human understanding is that we don't know the right ingredients for peace. We may know some ingredients like stability, security, relief, comfort, harmony, sympathy, ease, simplicity, and freedom. We can experience degrees of stillness, tranquility, quietude, serenity, rest, and calm. And often we substitute the word peace for these things. But many of these things are more of a soothing lull between moments of liveliness. And so we tend to think of peace as a sort of inactivity.

But God's peace is a quietness of soul, not of the worldly life. In Isaiah 32, the prophet envisions desolation for those who have not stayed their mind on God but who have, by settling for something less than perfect peace, become complacent. But then a time will come when “*The Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.*” (Isaiah 32:15-17) Quietness and trust forever... That means in the soul, within, inner peace, because it is forever; not in our outward activity where we have to slow down in order to be quiet. It says *forever*, not just in the routine of your daily life. It is spiritual peace.

God's peace is not something you gain for yourself by turning inward or by living a quiet life. Those may be nice, even wonderful, but they don't serve anyone but yourself. “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.*” (Matthew 10:34) There is nothing more divisive than the sort of peace that is merely here on earth without there being any glory to God in the highest. Without there being men and women of good will toward others.

How comfortable we become when we forget about others. How peaceful it is to live in ignorant neglect. “*For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. They who love father and mother more than me are not worthy of me; and they who love son or daughter more than me are not worthy of me; and they who do not take their cross and follow me are not worthy of me. They who find their life will lose it, and they who lose their lives for my sake will find it.*” (Matthew 10:35-39) There is peace...finding life! The reason it might seem like there's a sword is because we need to hack away the things that interfere with our relating together to Christ.

God's peace, the peace that surpasses human understanding, is beyond us because we are so quick to acknowledge our personal sensations of peace. But God's peace comes to us when we seek the peace of others, and not just those of our own families. God's peace comes to us when we follow the example of the Prince of Peace who came not to show us how to find some self-serving peace of mind, but perfect peace.

And there is nothing greater than that peace that is service; that peace that does for others what you would have others do for you; that peace of love for neighbor that reaches out to the beaten man at the side of the road the way the Good Samaritan did; that peace of the forgiving father who welcomed home the prodigal son; that peace that redeems the woman caught in adultery as it stands up for her and defends her from her accusers. This is the peace that is the effect of righteousness. And it's a perfect peace because it is an active peace. It is an active peace because when you find it, it feels so good that you want to do it again, and again, and again. It is an active peace because it tries to do what is right, *"and the result of righteousness is quietness and trust forever!"*

"Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. But our hearts *are* troubled because God's peace is beyond our understanding! We are troubled because the peace we do tend to find is an easy peace. It's so short-lived, like a lull between moments of liveliness. *"Neither let them be afraid..."* *"The counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things...: (John 14:26)* We will understand...some day. *"Thou dost keep them in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."* (Isaiah 26:3)

"And this will be a sign for you; you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12) You will find a helpless child that's been taken care of, nursed till it's full, wrapped in warmth, rocked till it's calm, and watched over while it sleeps. God's peace. That infant is God. God came in Jesus Christ, the child of Joseph and Mary. And they took care of Him. They took care of God when He came to us!

The peace that passes understanding comes when we are taking care of God. And Jesus said, *"Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these....you did it unto me!"* (Matthew 25:40)