

The Second Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2016
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The Prince of Peace

For many years my children would ask me what I wanted for Christmas. They don't ask me any more because I'd always say, year after year, "All I want is peace." Those first years I'd have to explain . . . I'd like for us to have peace in our family, peace in each of our own hearts, peace in the places we spend so much time – our schools, our work, our communities, and I'd like peace in our world. Christmas has always seemed to be a season to hope, to pray, to work for peace – on every level. Perhaps because we proclaim Jesus to be the "Prince of Peace."

Of course, this title comes from Isaiah's ancient prophecy dating back to the early 7th century before Jesus was born:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Isaiah's world in 690 BC was filled with war, conflict, darkness, evil. The northern half of the nation had been taken over by the powerful Assyrian Empire in 722 BC; now Judea and Jerusalem were threatened. The prophet introduced the hope for a new king, a Messiah, who would bring peace, establish justice, and save his people.

The world Jesus was born into 700 years later was also filled with war, conflict, darkness, and evil. The Roman Empire ruled by oppression, and the Jews in Palestine still yearned for a Messiah, a Savior, who would bring peace and justice. We see this violence clearly in Matthew's version of the Christmas story. The first gospel doesn't spend much time telling us how Jesus was born; Matthew goes to some length to explain Herod's rage, his slaughter of the innocents, the Holy Family's escape to Egypt, the need for Joseph and Mary to go to Nazareth since it wasn't safe to return to Judea. According to Matthew, Jesus is born into a world of conflict, violence and evil.

Yet St. Luke's version gives us the hope for peace. John the Baptist proclaimed this first hope, telling us that one is coming who will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" [who will] "guide our feet into the way of peace."... (1:79)

When Jesus is born, the heavenly host, the angels, sing to the shepherds the words with which we start our Eucharists, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth."

Luke finishes his story 40 days later when Jesus is presented by his parents in the temple. We'll celebrate this on Candlemas in four weeks. The aged Simeon lifts the baby from Mary's arms and exclaims that he is a "light" to all the world and now God will "dismiss your servant in peace."

Jesus comes to Jerusalem at the end of his life and weeps over the city. People don't understand all he's tried to teach; they don't understand his healing, his ministry. Jesus has a sense of his own approaching suffering and death; so on the day we call Palm Sunday at the start of that last week, we hear Jesus say, "*If you had only recognized...the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes...*" (Luke 19:41,42)

Some days later, after the Last Supper, Jesus tries to encourage his disciples:

Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you...not as the world gives... (John 14:27)

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. (John 16:33)

This peace that seems to pass all understanding does indeed come when Jesus rises from the dead and at the first Easter fills the disciples with the Holy Spirit and gives them peace. (John 20:19,21,26) This is the peace we share in every Eucharistic liturgy; the peace we are given in each blessing; the peace we are asked to live in our lives.

We can live in peace, first as we think about God coming to us as a newborn infant – powerless, dependent, full of hope and promise. We can live in peace when we know how much we need each other, how much we need love.

In his ministry, especially from the cross, Jesus shows us peace through forgiveness, through our relationships with each other, moving beyond judgment, beyond anger. Peace can come even through suffering when we know God is with us.

Finally, Christ's peace can come as we remember the promise of eternal life. Physical death is not the end. We pray that those we love will "rest in peace" after physical life is ended. This is our hope. The Prince of Peace we celebrate at Christmas can give us peace as we face death – for ourselves and for those we love. We can bring peace to those who face the end of life, aging, terminal illness, and tragic accidents.

We embrace this ministry of peace at the start of life, all through life, and at the end of life. This is the peace the baby Jesus brings. Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 84:1-8

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23