

“Righteous Peace”
Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 32:14-18;
Luke 1:67-80

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If I say “Christmas,” what’s the first word you think of? Tree? This week when I heard “Christmas,” I kept thinking of the word “gift.” At Christmas time it’s not unusual to begin to think about gifts. I know as a child that’s one of the things I thought about as I thought about Christmas—the gifts that were coming. Now I think more about the gifts that I’m giving. But with the coming of Christmas, we often think about gifts.

So I think about what kinds of gifts we have been given. I think about the gift God gives us in Jesus Christ, and one of the ways that is described is as the gift of peace. As I read the scripture today about how Zechariah was thinking about the coming of the savior and how the way would be prepared by John, there is a way in which it sounded like it was wrapped for us in the gift of forgiveness. So it is through that forgiveness that we get to the gift that God gives.

When you get a gift, it could be a variety of things. It could be a piece of art that I can hang on the wall, or it could be a backpack that I might take with me when I go hiking. When I had children much younger, oftentimes the gift seemed to come with some assembly required. As I think about the gift of peace that God is giving us I wonder what kind of gift it is.

I don’t think peace is something we’re given and we hang on the wall. Perhaps it’s more something that gets us to do something. I even wonder if it’s not one of those gifts that comes with some assembly required. I’ll tell you why I’m beginning to think that. It’s partly what Zechariah says about how John will introduce Jesus. He says the savior is coming to guide our feet on the path to peace. That doesn’t sound like something that we’re given, and then it’s over. If we’re guided to have our feet on the path to peace, perhaps there’s some assembly required. There’s something about his coming that leads us into peace, guides our feet into the path of peace. Indeed when he describes Jesus’ coming, he’s described like the sun coming up over the horizon—a light into our darkness as we sit in the shadow of death.

So I was thinking about it, especially since I got up in the night and as I was walking through the bedroom, I forgot about a piece of furniture. It would have been nice to have the light on so I could have missed that piece of furniture. Isn’t that what light does? The light doesn’t change the landscape. It doesn’t change where everything is in the room. It changes how we see it. And when we can see it, we can begin to move around the obstacles in the way. We can begin to be guided on the path to peace.

As we hear these announcements of how God brings peace from Isaiah, there are interesting pieces to these announcements. It says he’s announcing one for whom there will be (the King James says it nicely) *of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end*. It’s not something we’re given and it’s over. It’s something that begins and continues.

In our Christian way of seeing things, we see Jesus' coming as a first coming, and then there will be that final culmination when we will see a new heaven and new earth. But in between, we're on that path. We're in the midst of living in the light of Christ, so there's an increase of his government and of his peace.

In fact, it goes on to suggest that his Kingdom, characterized by peace, is established by justice and righteousness. If we look at Isaiah 9, verse 7, it says it is *established and upheld by justice and righteousness*. It seems that what he's coming to do is bring us justice and righteousness and in doing so puts our feet on the path to peace. He's the light that helps us see how to live. Those words, justice and righteousness, are often used together in the Old Testament. I talked a little about justice last week and how it's about taking us from a place of dispute and trying to heal that dispute and set us in a place that we can now move forward rather than just being at loggerheads.

It's interesting the way peace and justice are described in Isaiah 32, because I always thought peace and justice were opposite sides of the coin. The image he gives us is that justice comes to the desert and justice turns it into a fruitful field. So you can think of bringing water to a place where there is no water so there can be growth. That is like the solving of a dispute, enabling us to move on. And then it says righteousness is like that fertile field that grows into a forest, as it is translated here, but it's really more like orchard.

So the idea is that there's a maturing of the ability to sustain us. We need justice to get to the point where we can begin to do righteousness. Righteousness is living in right relationship with one another, trying to do that living together once we have gotten past the initial problems we had, and trying to make sure that as we hit other problems we work through it together so that we grow into something that produces fruit.

In Chapter 32 of Isaiah, the New Revised Standard Version says *the effect of righteousness is peace*. The King James translates it as *the fruit of righteousness is peace*.

It feels almost like when we encounter the light of Jesus Christ, he shows us the landscape, what it looks like to have justice and righteousness, to see that there's possibility for healing and then beyond that, the life together. Justice and righteousness allow us to move, to have our feet on the path to peace.

I find that amazing. God comes to us to show us the way to life because peace (shalom, in the Old Testament) is not just a static thing we hang on the wall. It is the way we live life together. So you might say what these verses are telling us is as Jesus comes as the Prince of Peace, he's going to bring peace, not through strength, but peace through righteousness, which also makes a lot of sense. It's how we get along together that develops and leads us to peace. It is indeed what he teaches us about what righteousness is: the love of God and the love of neighbor. It gives us stories like the Good Samaritan to show us what it means and looks like.

So as we look forward again to this celebration of Jesus' coming, think about the light he has given us, the light of justice and righteousness that puts our feet on the path of peace. Amen.