

“Peace”

Micah 4:1-4; Romans 14:13-23;
Luke 2:8-19

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Peace. I wonder what your first reaction to that word is? What is your first thought? As I have had conversations about peace this week, I have come to realize that it's not quite as easy as I have sometimes thought. What is your first reaction to the concept of peace?

Oftentimes I think about the idea that we all want peace to some extent. What is the answer to the beauty pageant question, “If you had one wish you could fulfill, what would it be?” “World peace.” We all know the right answer. Maybe that's why I've seen the bumper sticker that some people have that says “Visualize whirled peas.” Perhaps we've taken the ideal of peace and don't know what to do with it. Perhaps it's over-said or said glibly without much meaning, so that it becomes not much different to some people than something they can visualize—whirled peas.

It makes me think about that struggle we have in thinking about peace. Is it more than just a glib answer? The right answer? Or is it something that's real in our lives and important to who we are and what we hope for and what we live into? What is peace, after all? Why do we even pay attention? Should we pay attention to peace?

In the description of those shepherds on that night out under the stars where the angels appeared to them, I want to pay attention to what the heavenly host said to them. They said, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” The first part of that is a celebration. They are announcing this wonderful thing and they are giving glory and honor to God. God deserves this honor. But the second part is a little stranger. Peace to people of good will. Is that just what people deserve, like God deserves honor? How do we celebrate with the idea that peace should be among people of good will?

There's this announcement that as we have God coming to us, there's an invitation to celebrate with peace among us. What is that peace? Micah has this wonderful image of coming to the mountain of God and swords being beaten into plowshares. That's one element of what we think of as peace, that peace is not having war, not having conflict. I think Micah goes a little further when it goes on to talk about each person having their own vine and fig tree. Some way of support for themselves, some agency, perhaps, and some way of living their own lives.

The second piece of that is interesting—that they not be afraid of anyone. Right there it begins to take another step. Peace is more than just the absence of conflict. Perhaps it's also the absence of being afraid. Living in a context in which we need not fear. Speaking into our world today, there seems to be so much fear, and yet Micah is suggesting that peace is about a time when there is no fear, when fear is not part of our lives.

Now if we begin to look a little closer, we might examine the Greek word for “peace.” We find the word used when Paul is talking about how the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit? What was the word for “peace” that he was using to describe what God is inviting us into? The Greek word for “peace” there is “*eirini*,” which means *wholeness*—when all essential parts are joined together. It goes beyond the idea of just the absence of conflict or the absence of fear, and begins to bring it to a point where things fit, where they are right and go together.

I was thinking about my friend Nathaniel, who is really a composite of memories and stories. We talked last week about the hope Nathaniel found through faith, and then he found that faith began to lead him into that hope. As he began to live that out, he figured that he should try to do something, so he goes on a mission trip. As he goes on that mission trip, he recognizes at the end of one of his days of work, how incredible it has been to be working with this group of people to do something together. He’s tired, and yet has a sense of peace. They put up the walls of a house, enabling somebody to have shelter. They worked together and had conversation with the people who are going to live in that house. At the end of the day, when he is tired, he feels at peace. He realizes that so often we think of peace as being at rest. What he’s recognizing is that peace is not so much being at rest, but when he is at rest, that’s when he always recognizes that he feels peaceful. And the peace is not just that resting moment, because he had a peace-filled day. Things fit together. It was right. It was good. And now he’s tired, but it’s one of those good treads. He feels the peace-filled day with a sense of peace in his reflection on it.

This story begins to point to how peace is more than just a time-out. It’s when we engage in a way that helps things fit together, to make it whole. It doesn’t generally seem to be the way I think of peace, however. When I was working in the business world, if somebody came to me with their resume and said, “I want a job with you because I think I can bring peace to this laboratory,” I doubt if I would have hired them. I have this sense that being at peace is not being fruitful. I would think this guy just wants to come here and rest. And yet, perhaps I could have used a little more peace in that environment, if I think back on it.

And maybe peace is more than rest. Maybe it really has something to do with righteousness, with creating right relationships with God and with one another and with creation. Maybe it’s active and is not simply the absence of something. It’s the time when we’re active in a particular way, when we are creating those right relationships, when life is beginning to fit together.

It feels to me like that is what God is inviting us to do as we recognize the Prince of Peace. God is inviting us to recognize that we find our peace through looking to Christ because so often when I look at everyone else, my first thought is not peaceful. Sometimes it’s envy. Sometimes it’s wondering whether I’m as good as others. If I can look to Christ first and recognize that my value, the gift that is given, the very love of

God, is in Christ, I can begin to look at other people not as people I'm in a competition with, but who I'm living life with, who God has given for the joy of living together.

It is like when Jesus invites us to come around the table. It's an invitation to recognize that we are fed by God and that when we come together around the table, we recognize that there is a certain peace God has given us, a forgiveness and a grace that God has given us and that we give to each other. In that gift we find new life.

The interesting thing about peace is that so often it's been kind of the ideal, but it feels like an ideal that sometimes is so far away and so unrealistic that I can almost let it go and think nothing of it. In a world so conflicted, how can there be peace? Well, I believe there can be peace, and it starts with recognizing the peace God gives us, the grace that is given us, that we are each valued and loved by our God, and that then enables us to think about how we might do that for one another. And when peace is at work, right relationships are forming with creation, each other, and with God. The peace of God in Christ brings us together as we gather around the table, as we gather in worship, as we recognize each person we see as a child of God who has been given new life through Christ. We recognize that the heart God is giving us a heart of grace and love, which enables peace. And the Christ Child's coming is our invitation to live into peace.

We have the gift of the table. We have the gift of grace. We have the gift of Christ's peace that enables us to then become gifts for each other. We share the gifts as we value each other, as we care for each other, and as we build what makes for peace. Amen.