

Christmas Day 2014i – Propers I and II
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Peace on Earth: Our Christmas Hope

“And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all.’”ⁱ

Every year, there is at least one person who sends me a Christmas card that simply reads, “Peace on Earth.” It usually gets sandwiched in between other cards whether they be Santa and snowman Happy Holiday cards, or scenes of the Nativity. “Peace on Earth.” I’ve often found myself walking or usually rushing by its message as if it were just another smile button or a bumper sticker.

We have all become accustomed to the phrase “Peace on Earth” at Christmas. It’s found in most of the Christmas scriptures, the carols, and our greetings to each other. But the notion of Peace on Earth fades so easily into the background. The words “Peace on Earth” have become another accoutrement of the season—we have pumpkins for Halloween, turkey for Thanksgiving, and peace for Christmas.

Yet, if we read our newspapers, we see that there is very little peace on this Christmas, as peace is defined in the dictionary, not to mention the Bible. There is certainly little “freedom from civil clamor and confusion” as one definition puts it. Between warring factions and in war torn cities there is surely no “state of public quiet” as another definition puts it. In the Middle East, for example, people salute each other with “Shalom” or “Salaam” until the word for peace has come to have no more relevance or depth than hello or goodbye.

In Iran, China, North Korea, and numerous other places, the so-called “peace” is kept with repressive and coercive force as it was in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus’ birth. And there is no real “freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, calmness of mind and heart, serenity of spirit,” as yet another definition puts it. Even in our own vulnerable households, in our streets full of unrest, and in storm-damaged and economically battered communities, such calmness and serenity are more absent than present in our collective state of mind again this year.

Further away, between rival factions in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Ukraine – there is open conflict. Between and within India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestinian territories, and even in our own “culture wars” and racial and class divides here in the U.S., there are uneasy truces, if not open conflict. In place of goodwill, there is intense mutual suspicion and distrust. As spectators of foreign and domestic affairs, these hot spots seem to be fields for the contest between justice and peace. Those of us who want both feel anger and fear. Our own “Index of Apprehension,” as one newscaster calls it, is either

up or down depending on each day's headlines (or weather reports). Again, peace on earth is a question more than a greeting this year. The writer, Joseph Heller noted this universal disquiet with his very ironic statement, "Peace on earth would mean the end of civilization as we know it."ⁱⁱⁱ

So what then is this bold lettering "Peace on Earth" on the Christmas card and in our readings today? How do we honor this profound concept? Do we meet it with optimism or pessimism? Well, simple optimism is too simplistic; and pessimism is a cop-out if we are to be true to what binds us together as Christians, and as a human race. There is a third way – hope. This is what we are given at Christmas. In that event so long ago, a message of hope was set loose in the world that can still be heard. In Jesus born in Bethlehem we have the astounding in-breaking of the fullness of God into our human life and history. Only when God cuts through and enters fully into history in Jesus, do our personal and societal histories have any real chance of modifying their self-destructive course. As the line in the carol goes, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Yes, our hopes and fears do meet in the encounter with the God who came to us as a newborn child. With this birth, so much else was born: a new hope – a "new" God as it were – looking at us with brand new eyes that were older than time. As one Biblical commentator put it, "Anything is possible in a world where God consents to be born."^{iv} Again, "Anything is possible in a world where God consents to be born."

Setting in motion this wave of hope unlike the world has ever known was the simple cry of a baby—a baby born to turn the world and its self-destructive ways upside down. He came to tell the poor and all those who feel a need for God that they are blessed, and that they do not stand alone. He came to show a world obsessed with coercive power and violence a new way of living—a way of humility, compassion, justice, and sacrificial love. This was the message sung out by Mary and cried out by many in a world hurting for a Messiah. It is a hope made explicit in the angels' song: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." We are met at Christmas with a baby, but far more than a baby. More than a charming infant smiling in the straw, we are met with the Prince of Peace, a Deliverer for all humanity—the one who reaches across all manner of division to rebuild the bonds of our common humanity.

Our world today stands in need of such a Messiah, this Prince of Peace, who continues to bear and live such a message.^v In the midst of a reality that points toward despair, God calls us to live the Christmas message of hope. Hope is the quality of faith that gives people a way of looking at their lives and world without being overwhelmed. Hope is God's power and action in the midst of naked, harsh reality. Hope is what God gives us even when our worst fears have been realized. Such hope is God hoping in us, enabling us to believe and act in the power of life and love, in spite of evidence to the contrary, and until the evidence changes. If the world is to hear and believe such a message of hope in our day, we Christians must live it. It challenges us who worship at the manger to enter more fully, to embrace our troubled world. It challenges us to believe in and to invest our lives in Christ's ongoing mission of repairing the world in wholeness, justice and peace, and restoring right relationships, starting right where we are.

And so, Christmas asks each of us where our hope actually rests. For what or whom would we risk our hearts and even our lives? Of course, what we do may not bring peace, and our hope may falter if it were not for God hoping in us. As Emily Dickinson stated, “Hope inspires the good to reveal itself.” And because God hopes in us, such hope is sure and so will not disappoint. It is, thus, not just dependent on our limited psyches and imaginations nor our weak wills and hearts, nor on what we hear and see in the evening news. In the midst of personal and global realities which can point toward despair, we are given the gift of hope. And “Peace on Earth” is a message that clings to hope, keeps hope alive. And that is a decent greeting for any season.

This is summed up well in a poem by Madeleine L’Engle, entitled “The Risk of Birth,”^{vi} with which I conclude this Christmas homily. L’Engle wrote:

“This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Savior make his home.

When is the time for Love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet love still takes the risk of birth.”

Amen and Merry Christmas

ⁱ I am indebted to ideas put forward by Jim Wallis, Clayton Morris, Barbara Brown Taylor and Ellen Goodman over the years. See also Sojourners staff, “Hope in the Midst of Darkness” in *Sojourners Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Sojourners, December, 1977).

ⁱⁱ Luke 2:12-14 (KJV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Heller, Picture This (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 98.

^{iv} Clayton L. Morris and Barbara Brown Taylor, Worship and Preaching That Work For Evangelism (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1992), p. 36.

^v While economic and political crises tighten their grip, around the globe and here in this city cries for justice and peace are being heard.

^{vi} Madeleine L’Engle, “The Risk of Birth” in Luci Shaw, ed., The Risk of Birth (H. Shaw Publishers, 1974).