

“God With Us: Peace”

Isaiah 26:1-8 • Ephesians 2:8-22

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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For many people, this is one of the busiest and most stressful times of the year. There's the shopping, trying to find the perfect gifts. And it comes with all those crowds and the traffic. There's hauling out all the Christmas decorations and then putting them all away in a few weeks. There's the baking and cooking and cleaning and entertaining people at your house. It's no wonder 45% of people surveyed ranked Christmas right up there with changing jobs or moving as the most stressful events in their life. Some of you are getting anxious right now just thinking about it.

That's on top of the regular, every-day busyness and stress of life. There's still soccer practice and doctor's appointments. Turn on the news and you see the violence all around us. Wars. Protests. Fires. Storms. Addictions. Broken relationships. Cancer. And we come to church at Christmas and hear the angel say to the shepherds, "Peace on earth," and we think, "where is the peace?"

In the midst of this busyness and stress and anxiety, especially the stress of Christmas, it's important for us to stop and focus on what's really important. That's what Advent is all about. Advent reminds us that there is more to life than the hectic busyness and 24-hour news cycle. Instead of our usual hurried busyness, Advent reminds us to slow down and focus on Jesus by reflecting on a different aspect of our relationship with Him each week. When we slow down enough to think about it we find that the things we really want and need the most are things we can only truly receive through Christ, God with us: hope, peace, love, and joy.

Last Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent and we began our series on what it means to have God with us by thinking about *hope*, the hope we have because of Jesus. We talked about the way we seem to confuse hope with wishing. But real hope, you'll recall, is not something we can create. Real hope is the work of the Holy

Spirit. And because Jesus was raised from the dead, our hope reaches the level of a guarantee.

Now this week, we're looking at *peace*, and like hope, it's a word that we seem to misunderstand. In our modern society we tend to view peace as either the absence of war or conflict, OR we think of some warm, fuzzy feeling of tranquility. In fact, my favorite internet dictionary defines peace as "the normal, nonwarring condition of a nation; a state of mutual harmony between people or groups;" or "a state of tranquility or serenity." Now peace includes those things, but it doesn't seem to be enough. Deep down each of us knows that peace is more than just the absence of violence. So we still have the question, what is peace and how do we get it?

According to the website "world peace newsletter dot com," there are 4 steps to world peace. First, "find peace within yourself." I'm not sure how you do that. It seems to me that if you knew how you wouldn't need their website. Apparently, according to this website, the way to find peace within yourself is by looking at pictures of kittens and flowers and waterfalls. They've selected some for you to help get you started. Second, you are to "teach others the ways of peace," which I guess means you're supposed to email the pictures of the kittens to everyone you know. The third step to world peace is to "help those less fortunate than yourself," which they point out means even those people you may be at "war" with. Now, if you've found inner peace and shared it with others I can't imagine that you would still be at war with someone, but maybe it's your coworker who's tired of getting all your emails of pictures of kittens. The last step – I'm not making this up – you need to strive to evolve. I don't have a clue what that means. Maybe you're supposed to actually become a kitten.

Whatever it means, it's a long way from what the Bible means by peace. As our passage from Ephesians tells us, real peace means being

in a right relationship with God, and that only comes through Jesus Christ. Paul begins by saying that when we are separated from Christ we have no hope and are “without God in the world.” Very early in the Bible we’re told how we became enemies of God, separated from Him through sin and shattering the peace of the Garden of Eden. The rest of the Bible is really about God’s faithfulness to save us in spite of all the ways we try to screw it up. That’s really the source of our anxiety. Often times our busyness is an attempt to distract ourselves from our own sin. John Calvin commented that our “souls are always uneasy unless they rest in the grace of Christ.”

After reminding us of the bad news, Paul then tells us the good news. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.” That’s what we’re really celebrating at Christmas. God came into our world as a human so that we who were far off could be brought near to Him, reconciled to God.

Pastor and author Lloyd Ogilvie puts it this way: “peace is not only a gift of Christ, it is Christ Himself living His life in us.” This is why peace is included as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. When Christ fills us with His Spirit, our lives and our behaviors change. We begin to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God, which implies a process of growth or development that depends on our cooperation.

I think it’s helpful here to point out that the word “peace” in the Bible refers to the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is about total wholeness or well-being and it covers every aspect of our lives. There seem to be three main dimensions of meaning for shalom. First, and I think most importantly, it is closely tied to salvation. Shalom involves our relationship with God and with each other. Second, shalom involves a correct ordering of our lives. Whatever blocks God’s order for the world is the enemy of shalom. Third, shalom has a relational dimension, standing against oppression, deceit and fraud.

So what about you? What is it that is robbing you of peace with God? Looking at the Biblical meaning of true peace, it seems to me that there are three things that can get in the way of peace. The first is unresolved sin. Until you lay those things at the feet of Jesus and seek His forgiveness, they will continue to creep into your thoughts and prevent you from experiencing the peace that only Christ can give.

Second, refusal to be the agent of forgiveness in other people’s lives stands in the way of peace. To experience true peace, you need to forgive the people who have hurt you. You may also need to ask for forgiveness from those people you’ve hurt.

The third thing that can stand in the way of peace in your life is putting something else ahead of Christ. Even the good things we do will take away our peace if we put them ahead of Jesus in our life. If you are experiencing a lack of peace in some area of your life, it may be a warning signal that some thing or someone has taken Christ’s place as Lord of your life.

But there are also three things that can help you find that peace which passes all understanding. In Isaiah 26, we’re told that God will keep us in “perfect peace” if our minds are “stayed” or focused on Him. The first step in finding this perfect peace is to focus our minds on Christ. We do that through studying the Bible, through worship, and through prayer. No matter how difficult things become, no one can take away your ability to pray. Prayer focuses your mind on Christ and will fill your thoughts with His peace.

The second element in finding God’s peace is in seeking first the kingdom of God. This is best accomplished in a church family. As Paul says in verse 19, “you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” There is also no peace apart from seeking to know and to do God’s will. But you cannot be at peace if you’ve been given clear directions about a particular relationship or area of your life and you refuse to follow them. Faithful obedience is the soil where the fruit of peace grows.

The third thing God calls us to do in order to experience His peace is to be agents of peace and reconciliation. We are to help one another be reconciled to others, but we're also called to be involved with God in His task of reconciling people to Himself. We get to partner with God in his work here on earth and our Christian life is not complete until we become active, contagious communicators of Christ's love to others. Because it's God who does all the hard work, our task is really to love people enough to share with them the source of our peace. And it may be as simple as inviting them to join us for worship or a Bible study.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says "I give you my peace, which is different from what the world says is peace." Unlike the peace you produce from within yourself by reading funny jokes or looking at pictures of kittens on the internet, when you have the peace that comes from Christ you have the peace of shalom, peace with God, peace within yourself, and peace with other people. That's the blessing of God with us.

Amen.