

The Road to Bethlehem
“The Road of Peace”
Isaiah 9:2-7

And he will be called....THE PRINCE OF PEACE

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The word on our Advent Wreath today is PEACE. About 2,700 years ago, the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah caught a vision of a child to be born who would be called the Prince of Peace. This leader from the lineage of David would rule the world and there would be no limits to the peace he would bring. Cynics among us are saying why cry peace, when there has been no peace in the history of human kind? The militants remind us that even Jesus said, “*I came not to bring peace but a sword.*” Meanwhile, American soldiers and innocent civilians are dying in Iraq. And some mother simply wants to keep the peace when the family gathers for Christmas. Will there be any bells this Christmas day that sound the note of lasting peace?

**IF WE WANT PEACE, WE MUST MOVE FROM THE HOUSE DIVIDED
TO THE SELF UNITED.**

Peace is an inside job. The war zones of the world are but a reflection of the conflict in the soul. I've got me on my hands and the two of "us" do not get along very well together.

Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
There's one who's humble, one who's proud.
From much corroding care I would be free,
If I could determine which is really me.

The philosopher, William James, said nearly a hundred years ago that Christian Conversion is the process by which the divided self is unified. So the road to peace is first and foremost the personal journey of unifying our inner and outer selves.

The Hebrew word for peace is Shalom. In the Middle East, Shalom is a simple greeting of hello, or good-by, but the word is much richer than that. In the west, Shalom is translated “peace,” but the word is much more complex than that. Shalom is completeness, wholeness, and unity. John Wesley would have called it sanctification – the holiness of heart and life.

I was intrigued by an editorial in The Tennessean Friday concerning the moral lapses of religious leaders. It was written by an 18-year-old kid. In it he laments, “If we cannot have faith in people held in such high moral regard, in whom can we hold confidence?” Of course, he is right.

But I submit to you, that CEOs who cheat retirees out of their life savings, and politicians who lie to their voters, and religious leaders who bounce between piety and depravity, are not people who lack ethical moorings or sensitive consciences. They know right from wrong. They preach about it and teach about it, but they have so compartmentalized their lives that what they believe and how they live remain miles apart. The road to peace is integration of the self, so what I say and what I do, will become one, not two.

IF WE WANT PEACE, WE MUST MOVE FROM THE HOUSE OF HATE TO THE HOUSE OF LOVE.

In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy strikes out on a tangent saying, “I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world.” Charlie Brown tries to intervene by saying, “Lucy, I thought you had inner peace.” To which Lucy retorts: “I do have inner peace, but I still have outer obnoxiousness.”

Hate is alive and growing on planet earth. We hate because we are taught to hate. I am alarmed at churches that have become hate factories. We hate because we don’t know any better. If you are a different color, a different religion, a different sexual orientation than I, then I become suspicious of your looks, your actions, your motives. You become a class, a category, a concern, and a subject of demonization instead of a child of God.

We hate because we want revenge. Out in Katy, Texas, a group of Muslims bought 11 acres with plans to build a mosque. This suburban neighborhood of Houston however, rebelled. Craig Baker, a neighbor, got so mad he put up signs announcing weekly pig races hoping to convince the Muslims to change their minds. Muslims don’t hate pigs – don’t eat pigs. In despair, I bowed my head, “There is no peace on earth,” I said. For hate is strong and mocks the song, of “Peace on Earth Good Will to Men.”

In a world of rampant hate, is it any wonder Jesus summarized all the laws and commandments with this simple statement, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”* *“Love is the mother of all spiritual values. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. Whoever says he loves God, but hates his brother is a liar, and the truth is not in him. Let your love be sincere. Live in harmony with one another.”*

IF WE WANT PEACE, WE MUST MOVE FROM THE HOUSE OF FEAR TO THE HOUSE OF FAITH.

Terrorism may be defined as the use of violence and threats to intimidate and coerce

the enemy into a state of fear and submission. I don't know whose winning the war in Iraq, but of this I am quite certain, world-wide terrorism is winning the war of fear in the hearts and minds of people. It's staggering when you think about it. A relatively few people without a single government's official backing, equipped with no sophisticated military machinery, can cripple a world with fear.

As long as airplanes are grounded because an embarrassed passenger tries to hide a body odor by striking a match—fear is winning. As long as sophisticated X-ray machines at airports border on government sponsored pornography—fear is winning. As long as churches and places of prayer are locked down like prisons—fear is winning. As long as international scams and identity thefts threaten to destroy the very security I have worked to attain—fear is winning. When we have to spend a lot more time keeping people out of our lives, our homes, our communities than we do welcoming strangers into our midst—fear is winning.

So about this time of year, I long for a different message. I need to hear Elizabeth saying to Mary, everything is all right; it's going to be okay. I need to hear Gabriel saying to Joseph, I know you don't understand, but trust me on this one. I need, like the shepherds of old, to see a multitude of heavenly hosts filling the sky saying, "*Fear not for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.*"

Someone said an acrostic for FAITH could stand for "Full Assurance in the Holy." Faith helps me understand that it's not all up to me. As Charles Spurgeon said a long time ago, 'When God's warrior marches forward to battle confident that his own right arm and mighty sword are sufficient to conquer the enemy, defeat is certain.' Only when we own our weakness, will we discover God's strength.

Faith helps me trust God's strength.

When through the deep waters he calls us to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow,
For God will be with us, our troubles to bless,
And sanctify to us our deepest distress.

IF WE WANT PEACE, WE MUST MOVE FROM THE HOUSE OF POWER TO THE HOUSE OF PRAYER.

It is human nature to want to be in control. So we spend our lives trying to make a better impression, get a better job, receive additional attention, accumulate additional money, in the confusing hope that someone, someday will affirm us for whom we want to be. The name of the game is power, to be able to speak and have someone listen. So, we keep moving, keep working, keep pushing, keep talking, with little or no understanding that power has its problems.

Power is seductive. The more we get, the more we want. Power is threatening.

Somebody is always trying to unseat the powerful. Power is lonely. Listen in on any company and you will quickly hear the lonely whine of the top dog.

Henri Nouwen defines prayer as “The radical interruption of the vicious chain of interlocking dependencies that lead to violence and war.” Prayer is coming to rest in God. Prayer is stripping ourselves of everything and being totally free to belong to God.

Prayer is the road to peace that the world cannot give and the world cannot take away.

So I leave you with these words of Jesus: *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*