

“Prince of Peace”

Isaiah 9:1-7

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Most of us know the greeting used in Israel today. Turn to someone near you and tell them what you think that is...

That's right, it's *Shalom*. It means peace, and the whole phrase is *shalom aleichem*, "Peace be with you." It's a theme we hear a lot this time of year.

We Long For Peace.

Peace, shalom, is one of the most important themes of the Bible. And it's one of the things we long for in the deepest parts of us. It's more than the quiet in your house when the guests have left or when you've turned off the TV for the night. It's more than the absence of war. It's about the blessing and wholeness of God, the future he's bringing, what the Bible describes as completeness, well-being, soundness, perfection.

I remember a time when I thought losing someone you love would fade over time. My mom had a brother named Carter who flew as a bombardier in a Flying Fortress in WWII. He flew a lot of missions over Germany, and he came home at the end of the war. Five years later, he enlisted to fight in Korea. One day his plane was shot down over the Chinese-North Korean border.

His family waited for news, but it didn't come. A year passed, every day looking for news, then two years, then three. After 7 years, his wife Pinkie married again, and another man became the father of his daughter. It's been fifty-six years now, but the memory hasn't faded over time. Carter's wife is gone now, and so is the man she married. Carter's baby daughter never knew him, but he's not forgotten, and my mom still misses her big brother.

The apostle Paul writes,

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that [it] will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:19-21).

Isn't it like that for us? After all this time, here we still are, remembering the loss of war and thinking about the Prince of Peace. Peace is a long time coming, but we don't forget. We wait for it.

Peace Is A Gift From God.

Aaron's benediction in the Old Testament says,

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his face toward you and give you peace”—(*shalom*) (Numbers 6:24-26).

“Make his face shine upon” the people means to bless them, and that is the gift of peace. When God blesses his people, that peace is the gift he gives.

During this season, we’re looking at this passage that the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote 700 years before Jesus’ earthly career. Isaiah gives us a picture of the future God gives us. He comes into this dark world to save us. That’s what why the church calls this season Advent, because it means the *Coming*, the coming of Jesus. The word Messiah means the anointed one, and that’s who Jesus is: Christ, the one God sends to save us.

The Coming And The Character of Jesus.

Whenever the prophets gave a message from God, they were *foretelling* the future, and also *forth-telling*, or calling God’s people to live up to who God wanted them to be. We can see that in the passage today, and it breaks into two sections.

The first one in verses 1 to 5 talks about the coming of the *coming of the Messiah*, and the second section in verses 6 and 7 talks about the *character of the Messiah*. In other words, the peace we long for in the world is coming because God himself is coming, because of the kind of God he is.

So, when Isaiah says in chapter two,

“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:6),

there’s only one way that’s ever going to happen. Not because people somehow get better, or we lose our warlike instincts, or make spiritual progress. It’s not something we make happen at all. It’s because Jesus will win the victory, and one day he will bring in an age of peace.

How does that great promise come? Only one way:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. (Isaiah 9:2)

Because Isaiah says, a child will be born for us.

Those are touching words, especially in a time of war, and a time when we think of so many young people who were born, cared for, delighted in as they developed in mind and body, and then who were killed on the battlefield right on the edge of a long and productive life. It’s like an unfinished symphony, or a play that’s missing the second act that would have made sense of it all. Who knows what that young person might have done, the children they might have had, the beauty and goodness they might have created?

That’s ironic, isn’t it? Because when the Prince of Peace came into the world, he was cut down in his prime, too, killed at the hands of a brutal military empire.

It’s worth thinking about. Because when we hear these words in the Christmas season we usually miss the middle verses of the passage, about “the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor,” about “the tramping boots” and bloodstained uniforms. But those images are important to what Isaiah’s getting at. The passage opens with the picture of a great light coming, and ends with the promise of the son who will be the Prince

of Peace. And in between those images, there's the promise that has to do with our struggle in this present darkness. Let's look at God's promises.

First, God promises victory, but not the usual kind.

Isaiah says in the day of Midian God broke the rod of the oppressor. We remember the stories about the great battles of our history, maybe the Battle of Bunker Hill, or the Battle of the Bulge; the people Isaiah was talking to knew the stories of the great victories of Israel.

The book of Judges tells the story about the victory over Midianites (Judges 7). Their power was so oppressive that the Israelites had to make shelters for themselves in the mountain rocks and caves (6:2). The Midianites overran the country, destroyed crops, and killed everyone they could. Gideon raised an army of 32,000, but the Lord reduced it down to 300 men so that victory would be humanly impossible.

Gideon and his men surrounded the Midianite camp at night, blew trumpets, waved torches, and shouted "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon." The enemy fled in panic, and turned on each other with their swords. God established his justice, and broke the oppressor. It was a great victory, but not the usual kind. It was by grace.

Second, God promises peace, but without oppression.

There's a kind of peace that comes from simply crushing all opposition. That's just a police state, where everyone lives in fear.

But Isaiah says that one day God will set in place his justice on the earth, and he will erase the memory of war forever.

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:5)

Or like David wrote,

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
he burns the shields with fire. (Psalm 46:9)

That's because it's not just any peace, not simply the absence of open conflict, but happiness and wholeness. It's the *shalom* of God. So Isaiah says, "a Son is given, the Prince of Peace."

Jesus is the Prince of Peace who brings wholeness to the world. When we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," that's what Jesus came to do and to show us. And when you experience his peace, that's the wholeness and healing God's bringing to the world. It's what the world longs for. It's coming, God's peace, and it's going to cover the earth like the water covers the seas. God's making a new heaven and a new earth. We're still waiting in this in-between time, but it's coming.

Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with *justice and righteousness*
from that time on and forever. (Isaiah 9:7).

God is bringing his peace—not of brutal oppression that crushes opposition, but a peace with justice. That's why the angels announced at Jesus' birth,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and *peace on earth* to all whom God favors” (Luke 2:14).

Jesus Is Our Peace.

How does God bring that peace on earth? It's like a famous story you might know. In 1960, a young couple named Don and Carol Richardson felt God calling them to bring the gospel to a stone age people in Irian Jawa. The people were a tribe of headhunters who thought that the highest honor was to kill and eat their enemies. They honored treachery, because it showed a person was both powerful and clever.

Don shared the story of Jesus with them, and when he got to the part about Jesus' crucifixion, they burst into laughter. They especially loved the part about Judas betraying Jesus. Don realized he needed to figure out a way to make them understand in terms that made sense in their culture. He and Carol started to pray for a way to make them understand. In the meanwhile, the killing and treachery between the tribes continued.

Finally, Don told the people they had to make peace, or he and Carol were going to leave. The people liked the help they got from the Richardsons, so they agreed to make peace. They met in council with their enemies, and warriors from both sides lined up. Then Don saw the chief of his own tribe come forward and take his own baby, his firstborn son, from his mother's arms. The mother fell to the ground, sobbing. The chief brought the baby to the enemies, and placed it in their arms. Next, the warriors from his own tribe each placed their hands on the baby boy. Next, the enemy warriors disappeared into the forest. The baby was never to be returned to its parents.

The people explained to the Richardsons, “As long as the child lives, there will be peace between the tribes. If the child dies, there will be war again, and anyone who kills the peace-child will be killed himself.”

That's what God has done for us. There's a war raging between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. But God sent his child to make peace between God and us. The child suffered and died and rose from the dead, never to die again. Later in the book of Isaiah, he tells us:

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed...

and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5, 6b)

Jesus wins the victory, not by crushing his enemies—but by laying down his life.

Jesus achieves the peace, not with oppression—but a peace with justice.

Just like the warriors place their hands on the chief's son as a sign they accepted him as the peace-child, so we place our faith on Jesus to show we're at peace with God. But this child lives forever, and he guarantees our life with God.

That's the good news of Christmas. Jesus is the king who brings peace to our hearts, and one day, to the world. He does it by defeating our enemies. He does it by bringing his wholeness to everyone who follows him. He is doing it by one day bringing his healing to the whole world.

How Should We Respond?

I think the angels present at Jesus' birth help us know how to respond, when they say "Glory to God in the highest heaven." Our first response is to praise God for what he's doing through Jesus. Our first response is to worship. The Prince of peace is worthy of our worship for the kingdom he's bringing about.

The angels also say, "Peace on earth to all whom God favors." This peace comes from God's undeserved favor. At Christmas, we can receive the gift of peace. It's from the one who wins the victory over all our enemies. One day,

"At the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Or, in Isaiah's vision,

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

God invites us this morning to join the kingdom of Jesus, the Prince who brings true peace, peace with healing and wholeness and health. "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to all whom God favors."

We live in the in-between time, between Jesus' first coming and his Second coming, and Advent reminds us of that. And as we look forward to the fullness of the kingdom, when God brings the "up there" down here, when he will wipe the tears from every eye, when his justice and peace will join together at last and forever, he gives us a work to do. Not just to save a few souls from the coming judgment. But to seek God's justice, and to be a part of the new world he's making.