

Homily – On Earth Peace

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“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!””

When you ask the question “what do you want for Christmas,” many will say “peace on earth”. Imagine it. Peace... on... Earth....

Christmas is a time of strong emotions for many. It can be the joy of family, or sadness for those who are no longer with us. It can be an eagerness to play with the new toys that have been received, even toys for adults.

Set aside all of those things for a moment, and think about peace on earth. I would expect to see smiles on your faces, when you think about peace on earth.

In his time here on earth, Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God, and I imagine that peace on earth is a large component of the kingdom of God. Do you think it can happen? Do you think we will ever get there?

This year here at St. Barnabas we had a focus on peace during our short season of Advent. We want to do the heavy lifting of peacemaking. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. But, it is hard to have a smile when we think about the practical nature of peace on earth. We don't seem to be very good at it.

War

Genocide

Slavery

Sexism

Domestic violence

Violent crime

Our smiles disappear from our faces when we start thinking about the practical nature of peace on earth.

In her poem, “Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem” Maya Angelou describes our earthly existence this way.

*“Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.
Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.”*

In a few short stanzas Maya Angelou gets at many of the things that can break apart of peaceful lives. *Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche Over unprotected villages.* How can we ever get away from violence? How can we ever have peace on earth?

This was part of the message of Jesus. Two thousand years ago, Jesus came into the world to change the world. Roman society was cruel and violent. In one sense, Emperor Augustus had brought an end to the civil wars that had wracked the Roman world for decades. This was the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. However, there were still many violent wars to gather more territory into the Roman Empire, and there was an incredible amount of violence to suppress insurrection and support institutionalized slavery.

On that night two thousand years ago, the angels proclaimed a different type of peace to the shepherds in the hills that night. The peace of empire is based on oppression and violence. The peace of Jesus has no room for oppression and violence. It is a totally different power dynamic that has no room for empire.

Now, many of us equate peace on earth with the elimination of wars, and I certain think it is an important component. In his book *Winning the War on War*, Joshua Goldstein argues that the past 10 years have seen fewer war deaths than any decade in the past 100 years. And Harvard psychologist, Steven Pinker, goes even further. In his book *The Better Angels of our Nature*, he contends that we may be living in the most peaceful period in the history of our species. The authors of these two books demonstrate that the four thousand years of recorded history have been bloody times. During much of history more than a quarter of the population died violently. Even with the genocides of Africa or the wars of the Middle East, violent deaths are down today.

In addition, over the last one hundred years, it seems like we have seen a lot of improvement in the rights of women and the rights of gays and lesbians. We

certainly have a lot more room for improvement, but here in the U.S. we have begun to share rights and even power beyond rich, white, straight men.

However, it is hard to believe since violence seems to be in the news every day. Whether it is in Ukraine or Gaza the news is filled with violence. It may be that mass media has just made us more aware of violence and that this is actually a time when we have less violence compared to other centuries. So maybe we are getting a bit more peace on earth. Perhaps as a people we are getting less violent. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were true? Perhaps the promises of the enlightenment, reason and modernity are finally coming true.

Now, reductions in wars is an important component of peace on earth, but I think there are two other parts of the peace on earth being proclaimed by the angels. We also need to learn how to be healthy about power. Jesus came to turn the tables. Jesus came to challenge the power structure of Rome and to say that there is a different way. Holding power is not the way to achieve real peace. Instead, learning to unshackle ourselves from our desire for power is the way of real peace.

This message was true for the Roman Empire and it is still true for us today in twenty-first century America. This is part of the Christmas message that is relevant for us as we live in another empire. Power is something Americans are very familiar with. We have a lot of it. Power is one of those things that separates us, one from another. Power is one of those things that lift some up while it pushes others down.

Two thousand years ago, the angels came to proclaim the arrival of Jesus to the shepherds. Shepherds were some of the lowliest members of society back then. In fact they were about as low as you could get. Yet these were the people that were the first to hear the good news.

During his whole life, Jesus continued to work with and walk with the lowest of society. It is a grand thing if violence is diminishing in the world, and wouldn't it also be a grand thing if we finally learned how to give up power.

Now, there is a third part of peace on earth. This is the peace that passes all understanding. This is the supernatural peace that we can have in the midst of a less than perfect world and life. Let me repeat that, this is the supernatural peace that we can have in the midst of a less than perfect world and life. This is the peace that can only come from God. We can have this kind of peace, genuine peace, profound peace, only when we are right with God,

when we have been reconciled to God, when we understand that God loves us, cares for us, and is always present with us.

We can have peace only when we welcome Jesus as the Messiah. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our relationship with God has been healed. The re-creation of the universe has begun. Through Jesus we have once again become God's beloved sons and daughters.

Now, here's a little language lesson. Shalom is a Hebrew word of greeting that actually means "peace". Isn't that a nice thing to say to one another? Instead of saying hello or goodbye you say "peace". Shalom. "Through Jesus, we are promised that we will experience, not just shalom - peace, but "shalom, shalom" perfect peace, complete peace, the fullness of peace, so that not the tiniest little bit of peace is lacking or missing. That peace that is supernatural, that peace that is incomprehensible, that peace that passes the understanding of human beings comes to those who lean on God in their thoughts and prayers, who lay their mental weight on God.

We can have complete peace, shalom shalom, because we know that God is good, and has our best interests in God's loving heart and powerful mind. We can have peace knowing that God has pledged to take care of us. We can cast our cares on God, because God cares for us. We can have peace because God keeps God's promises. We can have peace because the eternal God is trustworthy, reliable, and never changes."

Let us all pray for a continued reduction in violence around the world. In addition, let us pray to break the shackles of power. And most of all let us lean into God's eternal and unchanging love and ask for the best Christmas present of all, the peace that passes all understanding.

Shalom, shalom and Merry Christmas.