

Names for the Messiah: Prince of Peace
Isaiah 9:2-7
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Throughout Advent we have looked week by week at each of the royal titles given to the newly coronated king in Isaiah's oracle and at how Jesus was seen by the early church as the fulfillment of each of these titles. After examining the king as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God and Everlasting Father, we come tonight to the fourth and final title bestowed by Isaiah: Prince of Peace.

Right away we are forced to reckon with the paradox of the ways human kings go about trying to achieve and maintain peace. As we've said throughout this series, the king was responsible for the well-being, or *shalom*, of the entire kingdom. An effective king would, therefore, assure that his realm would have a prosperous, sustainable economy, be productive in agriculture, and have just social relationships with particular concern for the poor and vulnerable. These goals would be impossible without peace so the king also was responsible for fostering fruitful international relations.

But, the truth is that kings in Isaiah's time, and also in Jesus', usually made their fame and fortune by conducting successful military operations. War, or the threat of war, was a near constant reality—in that regard not much has changed from the 8th century BCE to the 1st century to the 21st century. In the OT vision, to achieve *shalom*, there must be disarmament, for as long as kings and countries maintain arms against one another, peace will be at most a restless, unstable possibility. That is why prophets like Isaiah and Micah called for those who hold arms to beat their swords into plow shears and their spears into pruning hooks, and that they not learn war anymore. Only then can the community enter into *shalom*.

The problem was that even when disarmament was achieved, it was always imposed by the victor on his adversary. Peace came not by negotiation or reconciliation but as spoils of war that the winner claimed over the loser, with the loser having no say in the quasi-peace that ensued.

So, it is fair to say that "peace," both in ancient times and now, makes for grand rhetoric that is seldom matched by the facts on the ground. It turns out that peace makes a better political slogan than a credible political reality and political slogans are notoriously used to dishonestly provide cover for policies that are sure

to result in acute social conflict and destabilization. Jeremiah speaks directly to just such a situation when he writes, “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have created the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer 6:13-14)

In actuality, it was a rare occasion in ancient Israel when the political realities coincided with their exalted religious, liturgical language. But, that doesn’t mean the language was empty or futile. The language of peace continued to hold out the possibility that the political reality would come to conform to the rhetoric. The rhetoric of peace served an important function in holding before the people a vision of an alternative society in an alternative world. For Jeremiah, such a possibility was grounded in forgiveness:

“I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth.” (Jer 33:6-9)

Along with Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel likewise put forth visions of peace that look beyond shabby historical reality, past the facts on the ground to a day when their visions will transform reality. In the meantime, it is the hope of the faithful that holds on to the vision of peace.

It is in this tradition of a vision of peace for all humankind that Jesus of Nazareth is born. Immediately in the Bethlehem story, the divine angelic messengers who announce this “royal birth” anticipate that through this newly born king, peace on earth and goodwill to all peoples will come. But, this is no conventional birth and no conventional king; as an agent of God’s peace, he will defy all the usual categories. It is impossible to imagine Jesus imposing peace by seizing and destroying the weapons of the defeated. Instead, the peace that he will initiate and bring into being is a peace that passes all human understanding and that defies all ordinary expectations. Rather than military might, Jesus’ peace is wrought in vulnerability that does not seek to impose its way.

The ministry of Jesus, with its narratives of miraculous transformations, concerns the restoration of the healthy order of creation. After healing first one person and then another, he often dismisses these transformed persons with a

blessing of “peace.” It is more than a simple goodbye. It is in fact a recognition that in each particular case, the *shalom* of creation has been restored. That’s why he can say with the forgiveness of the “sinful woman,” “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:50) With the woman who could get no help from doctors but was “immediately healed,” when she touched the hem of Jesus’ robe, he said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (8:48)

And, what Jesus did himself, he expected that his followers would also do: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house! And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.’” (10:5-6) His disciples are to come in peace; they are to find those who share in peace; and they are to let peace rest on those who will share. These instructions suggest that peace is a quite specific, interpersonal transaction, so that the peace extended by the disciples is a person-to-person happening that lies beyond the conventions of imperial expectation.

Perhaps the most spectacular story of peace is found as Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem shortly before his death. Anticipating the coming Roman destruction of the city, Jesus laments, “They will crush you to the ground, you and your children...and they will not leave one stone upon another.” But Jesus first acknowledges that it could have been otherwise: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (19:44, 42)

The possibility of an alternate outcome depends on knowing the things that make for peace. While Jesus doesn’t enumerate those things here, he has spent his entire ministry giving the prescription: Peace requires the capacity to forgive. Peace requires a readiness to share generously. Peace requires the violation of strict societal stratification whether based upon class, economic, ethnic or religious grounds. Peace requires attentiveness to the vulnerable and the unproductive. Peace requires humility in the face of exaltation, being last among those who insist on being first, and denying self in the interest of one’s neighbor. These are all practices that mark Jesus’ presence and the presence of his peace in society.

Of course, all these practices are diametrically opposed to the conventional assumption and practices of empire. In the empire:

- There is no forgiveness
- There is no generous sharing
- There is no violation of class stratifications
- There is no attentiveness to the vulnerable and the unproductive

- There is no humility in the face of exaltation
- There is no readiness for being last in a world of aggressive self-promotion
- There is no denial of self for the sake of one's neighbor

And, not surprisingly, in its refusal of the things that make for peace, the empire generates a society of hostility, aggression, greed, conflict and violence. Jesus came to show us another way.

It is one of the great temptations of our age to celebrate the birth of Jesus by leaving him in the manger. We want the warm glow of candlelight and the soft, cuddly swaddling clothes; the angels singing and the shepherds kneeling. The last thing we want or expect is to have the saintly crèche scene disturb us, and to be sure, the church has been complicit in keeping us blissfully comfortable. But, that is not what Jesus was about. Jesus came to inaugurate God's peace, and God's peace defies the way the world is run. The world awaits a peacemaker who will ensure our advantage over all others. Instead, the peace Jesus brings is dangerous, subversive, and a contradiction of all that is usual. When we confess him as "Prince of Peace" we acknowledge that the Christ child who is born, coronated and worshiped is innocent, but he is not innocuous.

Amen.