

The Jesus Gift of Peace
Luke 2:25-32 and John 14:25-27
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Is there anything more universal than the desire for peace? True, some people don't want peace at all. There are those who thrive on conflict, whose livelihood depends on keeping animosity and hatred stirred up, or whose identity is defined by *not* being like those they see as enemies.

But for most of us, we long for more peace in the world and in our lives. We would be thrilled for wars to cease altogether and enemies to lay down their arms and live in harmony. We would love to hear the civil discourse in our country become respectful and to see those in authority work together for the common good. We would shout for joy if our inner cities were places of supportive community, if abuse was a horror of the past, if we no longer lived wondering where the next act of gun violence will take place. And, we long for freedom from the bitterness, envy, worry and anger that robs us of peace in our own hearts.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that any desire for peace is a pipe dream. Human beings are too broken, too sinful and the divisions between people and nations too deep to seriously entertain the idea that peace is possible. But then Christmas happens.

Christmas is the dramatic reminder that all things are possible with God, that because we were making such a mess of God's creation project, God himself came to this world to bring peace to our troubled planet and our troubled souls. Christmas offers us a great gift, if we will only accept it in faith: the gift of peace given to us by the Prince of Peace. Christmas offers us peace with God, peace with ourselves and peace with others.

The way this gift comes to us is something of a surprise. God does not show up, sprinkle us with fairy dust and suddenly, we are overcome with generosity towards our fellow human beings, embracing them and resolving all our differences. Oh, if only....Instead, God invited some pretty unassuming characters to participate with him in a divine drama—a teenage peasant girl, a righteous carpenter laboring away in an insignificant village, some shepherds no one would

have given a second look unless it was to yell at them to get their flocks out of the way. All of them in their own way must have been afraid, but they each took a deep breath, exhaled and walked out to do something big and wonderful though they themselves seemed really small. They accepted God's invitation to be part of the story of God coming into the lives of fear-filled people in a fear-filled world in order to give them the gift of peace.

This gift of God's peace allows those of us who would have never imagined we could be part of something big and significant and eternal to find our rightful places in the story of God's love and peace for all people because the story is not finished.

Many of us are in touch with fear and evil in a way that constantly weighs upon us. Some of us can remember a time during the Advent season many years ago—December 7, 1941—when in a frightened world America was brought abruptly into World War II. There was a lot of fear then, tragically causing Japanese Americans to be put in internment camps. A few more of us remember what the 1950s and 60s felt like with the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War and the Cold War. We remember the kind of alarm that led children to get under their desks at school, hands over head to practice a drill that would be activated if a bomb was dropped. Some of us remember Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream for a nation where people of different backgrounds could live together peacefully. Great strides were made by his and others' heroic work, but still today people live with fear because of the color of their skin.

Many more of us remember September 11. We have moved on with work and school and family life, but the anxiety and dread has remained for many people—apprehension of more bombs, school shootings, more innocent people being hurt, children and families running for their lives. Fear is real.

The story of Jesus' birth is precisely for times just like the one we live in. We sometimes forget that the Christmas story includes those who are afraid and includes those who are looking for peace. Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus will flee in terror from the murderous intent of Herod, becoming refugees in Egypt for a time. It must have been confusing how a family so small and insignificant could be swept up in a story so big. Yet they walked in faith to do something that could only be accomplished with the Holy Spirit overshadowing them. Despite their circumstances, they experienced peace and brought peace into the world.

All of this is a reminder that God is including you and me in the divine story as well. You have a part. You have a role. God has something for you and something God wants to do with you. But, don't be surprised if that something sometimes causes you to be afraid. The thought that God wants to use us in an eternal way will cause us to tremble, but instead of allowing fear to paralyze you, let it confirm that you are being included in the story. See yourself as one in a long line of people who were afraid but who responded to God in faith anyway.

Because we have received the gift of God's peace, followers of Jesus can't remain silent. We have something to say that our family, our friends and the world need to hear. We can't let a meme, a tweet or a social media post form how we feel in difficult times. We are the ones who must say, "Wait, I know a different story. I know what this situation looks like, but I know a different truth that changes everything." It sounds crazy to proclaim that God has come into the world and that that arrival makes a difference, but that is what Christians believe. We don't have to live in fear of a terrorist group or a political party. We live as those who have encountered peace in Jesus Christ, and we become those who bring the gift of peace to others by proclaiming that a King has been born. Because of what we have received from God, we bring peace. We bring it into our homes, into our offices, into our social media posts, into our community. We bring the peace that Jesus brings. We have been invited into the story to be messengers of peace.

There is always a time when we think, "I can't do something as big as that. I can't bring peace into the world." Isn't that what Mary wonders? How can this be? She tells God why she is unqualified, unprepared, and unsuitable for the task. God reminds her that it will not be something she does on her own, but a work of the Holy Spirit. Mary looks at it all. She considers the enormity, the beauty, the absolute absurdity that she would be called to be part of it. Then she exhales and walks out. So do Joseph and the shepherds. Joseph exhales and steps out to take Mary as his wife. The shepherds exhale and run down from the fields to meet Jesus.

God is giving you the gift of peace and then inviting you to take that gift and share it with others. Perhaps the scariest thing you can imagine this Christmas season is extending a hand in peace to someone you have been alienated or cut-off from. Perhaps there is a relationship that is broken because you are holding on to a hurt or betrayal from the past. Is God inviting you now to go in the spirit of Christmas and make peace, not on your own, but in the power of the Holy Spirit? Don't put it off any longer. Drop your pride, your resentment, and go set it right.

With the help of God, go make peace today. Christmas offers us the gift of peace with God, with self, with others, but it's up to us to accept that gift. Amen.