

Thy Kingdom Come: Peace on Earth  
Nov. 28 First Sunday in Advent, 2010  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

Scripture:  
Psalm 122  
Romans 13:11-14

The last word in the Bible is one of hope.

As John of Patmos concludes his fantastic vision known as the Revelation, he offers a three-word prayer of hope, "Come, Lord Jesus."

So end the sixty-six books of Holy scripture, an ending that is in fact open-ended, not an ending at all but a beginning. All the words of scripture – all the prayers and the parables, all the prophecies foretold and realized build to one final crescendo – an invitation, a beckoning, a yearning, a longing, a pregnant plea of anticipation.

"Come, Lord Jesus!"

The season we begin today – Advent – is a time of waiting. And we wait with those same words on our tongues and in our prayers. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Actually, a better word for the emotion of that prayer is expectation and expectation is a cornerstone of the Christian life. The difference between waiting and expecting is that sometimes we don't know what we are waiting for. In contrast, the discipline, even the joy, of expectation is to look forward to something we have already seen, something we know to be true. So we hope for it, knowing we will see it again.

I suppose to someone outside the church, the season of Advent doesn't really make much sense. Every year, we people of God look ahead. For four weeks, we train our hearts and minds on the one who is to come. Then we hold the greatest celebration we can imagine. All for something that some may think occurred as a one-time-deal 2,000 years ago.

"Why," the skeptic might ask, "do you wait for something that has already come and gone? Why go through the motions? Why even pretend you are waiting? What can you possibly hope for that you haven't already seen?"

That misses the point entirely, of course. It equates Advent with going to see a movie that you've already seen or reading a book whose ending you already know, an experience that holds no new wonder or surprise or possibility. If that were all there was to it, Advent would have all the significance of another pre-Christmas sale or office party.

Deep in all of our hearts, we associate Christmas with the nativity and the arrival of an innocent newborn in swaddling clothes, the first hours of a most remarkable life, both human and divine. That picture stays with us because we can see it, we can associate with it. We have known it from childhood. Perhaps we even acted it out in a Christmas pageant. We have all held infants. And in the one infant we can begin to get our minds around how God came into the world, Emanuel, God with us.

But the joyful burden of the Christmas message, if one can even say such a thing, is that it is about far more than just a baby in a manger. Christmas is the in-breaking of a new age. It is a rupture in time that re-defined all time before and after. It is the re-writing of history in the establishment of a divine kingdom. This is not a kingdom that we look for some time in the future but a kingdom that is at work in our very midst. We are all called to be its citizens and servants even in the midst of what looks most often like the same old world with all its problems and dysfunction. In Christ, with Christ, through Christ, God's kingdom has arrived in this broken, imperfect earthly realm.

And, every now and then, we get to see it. We catch a glimpse here and a snapshot there. We think or simply feel that we have seen the world as God would have it. That is the world that began on Christmas Eve, the world in Christ and through Christ. The new heaven and the new earth colliding with the old, momentarily opening our eyes and hearts to God's will for creation, reminding us that God has more in store for us and has begun bringing it about.

Each week in the Lord's prayer, we pray the words "Thy kingdom come." That's as good an Advent prayer as I can imagine. So I invite you to dwell on that prayer with me this Advent, here on Sunday mornings but also in your own personal time of prayer and preparation.

What, then, does that kingdom look like? How do we recognize it?

The voices of scripture that we hear today and in the four weeks to come point to it. These voices from the lectionary – the church's recommended set of weekly Bible passages – are the prophet Isaiah, the Psalmist, the Apostle Paul in his letter to Rome

and the Gospel of Matthew. As we hear today and in weeks to come, they announce the kingdom of God with distinct clarity:

They speak of hope. Not just any hope, but hope in the Messiah. They speak of patience and endurance until the blind see and the oppressed are set free. They announce restoration to life. As a flower straightens up and is restored by the sun, these voices tell of how our own personal restoration by the life-giving rays of the face of God. And, as we heard today in Psalm 122 and Romans 13, they speak of peace, the peace that descended on Earth in the person of Jesus the Christ.

\* \* \*

The idea of peace has always been closely associated with Christmas. Pay attention this year to the Christmas cards you receive. See how many include the idea of peace in words or pictures. In the worst cases, it has been co-opted by commercialism, companies that want us to believe that we should associate the purchase of a car or a vacuum cleaner with peace.

All the more important that we seek peace for its own sake. Where might peace be for you this Advent? If only in our mind's eye, we can transport ourselves to a quiet night sometime, somewhere. Perhaps there is snow falling in the moonlight outside a window. The world is at rest and the peace of mind and peace of heart that we all so desperately seek is nearby, within reach if not actually upon us. What is that time and place for you?

For me, it is Christmas Eve, but not just because that is the politically correct answer. In the weeks and days leading up to Christmas, we hardly make time for peace – to be with God in the peace that God wills for the world. Rather the opposite. But there is something about Christmas Eve that almost forces peace on our lives. The shopping is done. Businesses close. Even the radio and TV are devoted to Christmas. One of my favorites is the Lessons and Carols service broadcast from Westminster Abbey.

In the last few years, we've been given a new moment of peace in our Christmas Eve service here at Caldwell. I am already looking forward to it. So it is natural that the peace of God is closest – even to non-believers – on Christmas Eve, when the entire planet is at the height of expectation.

Then there is peace among nations. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tensions in Palestine and, now, the saber rattling in Korea. They all sadly remind us that this world has a taste for conflict and conquest.

But, even in war, God's peace intervenes. In every war, there are stories of the tradition of the Christmas Eve truce. Civil War history includes tales of how Johnny Reb and Billy Yank volleyed verses of carols and called out "Merry Christmas" to each other from their pickets amidst a night of cease fire.

The most well known Christmas Eve truce came between Allied and German troops in World War I. Against the wishes of the upper command, troops from both sides came out of their trenches into the no-man's land in-between. Up and down the front, they exchanged gifts, showed pictures of loved ones and played soccer for the entire day of Christmas.

As a boy, I became familiar with the idea of a Christmas truce but in a quirky and more light hearted way. For a time, my father and I built model airplanes, the kind with balsa wood frames made of many intricate pieces, covered in thin, tissue-paper like skin. Then on went the paint and the decals. We specialized in World War I by-plane aircraft, the British Sopwith Camel and the German Fokker line.

It was the 1960s and the British Invasion was in full force, led by the Beatles but with so many look-alike and sound-alike acts. All of this came together in a rather odd way at Christmas, when our family played records. Out came the "45" of the classic one-hit wonder about Snoopy and the Red Barron by the Royal Guardsmen. (Veronica, you're not the only one to follow the wisdom of Snoopy.)

Do you remember the Royal Guardsmen and their tale of that fateful Christmas Eve?  
Here is how it went:

The news had come out in the First World War  
The bloody Red Baron was flying once more  
The Allied command ignored all of its men  
And called on Snoopy to do it again.

Twas the night before Christmas, 40 below  
When Snoopy went up in search of his foe  
He spied the Red Baron, fiercely they fought  
With ice on his wings Snoopy knew he was caught.

The Baron had Snoopy dead in his sights  
He reached for the trigger to pull it up tight  
Why he didn't shoot, well, we'll never know  
Or was it the bells from the village below.

The Baron made Snoopy fly to the Rhine  
And forced him to land behind the enemy lines

Snoopy was certain that this was the end  
When the Baron cried out, "Merry Christmas, my friend"

The Baron then offered a holiday toast  
And Snoopy, our hero, saluted his host  
And then with a roar they were both on their way  
Each knowing they'd meet on some other day.

Christmas bells those Christmas bells  
Ringing through the land  
Bringing peace to all the world  
And good will to man

\* \* \*

Whether it is with Snoopy and his Sopwith Camel on the banks of the Rhine or in our city, our homes or our heads and hearts, how can we get to that place of peace this Advent?

As people who have seen glimpses of the Kingdom of God, as citizens and servants of that Kingdom, how might we get there sooner and faster – and, thus, be a bearer of peace to those around us?

Surely we can pray as instructed by Psalm 122, which we heard a moment ago.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

    "May they prosper who love you.  
Peace be within your walls,  
    And security within your towers."  
For the sake of my relatives and friends  
    I will say "Peace be within you." (vv 6-9)

In those words, the Psalmist pictured a new Jerusalem as a reflection of the kingdom of God, marked by peace because there was justice. The two go hand in hand.

Here in Charlotte recently, some protesting decisions to close several mostly African-American schools used the old phrase "where there is no justice, there is no peace." Our former mayor said that chant risks inciting violence. The local head of the NAACP responded by calling the former mayor a "racist." So it goes lately with our worldly leaders or those who, at least, would like to be thought of that way.

In the Kingdom of God, that idea – “no justice, no peace” - needs no spin or interpretation. Throughout the history of this broken world, it has come to pass time and again. Where injustice and inequity are allowed to stand, sustained peace and shared prosperity among the people has not.

More directly, we might be agents of peace to those around us. In a season of too much noise, too much activity and too much stuff, we might be messengers of silence, ambassadors of stillness and advocates for simpler living. All of those things make for peace.

In the passage from Romans we heard earlier, the Apostle Paul calls on believers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this season of Advent, that doesn’t mean be extra polite, make nice for a while, let someone else have that parking space at the mall. Those things don’t hurt, but the kingdom of God is about far more than sugar-coating that washes away when our routines return to reality.

The wonderful author Frederick Buechner once wrote that “for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.”<sup>1</sup>

So, my friends, as those who pray “thy kingdom come,” as those whose scripture ends with the words, “Come, Lord Jesus” let us be faithful and authentic citizens and servants of the kingdom we already know and occasionally see. Let us enrich the expectation of those around us this Advent in and through the peace-providing hope we so confidently claim.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC