

August 25, 2024

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)

pg. 200, NT, Pew Bible

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

The Prince of Peace

Peace. Peace among the nations. World peace. It's the wish of every Miss America contestant. But it's also the dream of God's prophets. In a weary, war-torn world, it's easy to become cynical about any prospects for peace that go beyond the realm of our own private lives. We chalk it up to human nature. We wave off the very concept of peace as a fleeting, ephemeral pipe dream. And yet, the Bible does not endorse such cynicism. The first mention of peace among the prophets is when Isaiah dares to speak of the birth of a child who would be, among several other titles, the Prince of Peace.

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given;

And the government shall be upon his shoulder,

and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there

will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Ever since Cain rose up in the field against Abel, the world has known conflict. Human history is written in blood. And still, the prophets, old and new, dream of swords turned into plowshares, and spears turned into pruning hooks. In our post-modern world, tanks would become farm tractors and missile silos granaries. The pragmatist will dismiss these dreams as incongruent with the way the real-world works, where might makes right, and peace comes only by domination or the threat of mutually assured destruction. The prophets have always been a minority voice. It was their role to cry out for something different, something new, something beyond the status quo...calling us to our better angels.

While they are easy to dismiss, we desperately need the prophets because we desperately need an alternative vision. Without such dreams, nothing would be open to change. We need a message that transcends the dominant script. We need the poems and the idealism of the prophets because we live in a world where peace is treated as an unwelcome vagrant by those who have invested in the killing machines that threaten our very existence. Of more modern prophets, folksinger Bob Dylan offers:

We live in a political world
Where peace is not welcome at all,
It's turned away from the door to wander some more
Or put up against the wall.

Instead of surrendering to the status quo, the assumption that the world will always be what it is, the prophets insist that there's a better way. They are incapable of shrugging their shoulders and sighing *que sera, sera* at the massive injustices lingering around us. In a world where nations spend three billion dollars per day on military defense while seventeen thousand children die of hunger during that same twenty-four-hour period, the prophets dare to say no, enough of this, this is not the way of God!

It was during a time when the nation of Israel lived under the shadow of the ominous Assyrian Empire who would assimilate many nations, religions, and

cultures of the people of the near east of that era, that Isaiah envisioned God's deliverance in the form of a child yet to be born—a child who would become a great leader and bear the responsibility of government upon his shoulders and succeed where all the rest had failed. He speaks in superlatives; he will bring wonderful counsel; he will be the mighty God among us; he will be the progenitor of a new way of being human; he will be the Prince of Peace. This last title resonates in our hearts because it harkens to our deepest longings, our deepest hungers. While this title has often been domesticated to the Christmas card industry and relegated to a brief mention in the carols we sing at that time of year, Isaiah wasn't simply waxing poetic. He was calling forth a new way of life, even a new world, claiming that, in the power and promise of God, this dream could become reality.

If the Hebrew prophets were daring in their dreams, the Christian apostles were bolder still. They not only endorsed the dream of the prophets—the dream that God would someday govern through a son whom God would give—but they also dared to announce that this kingdom had already begun in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace. Peace is a theme that runs through the epistles of Paul to the fledgling churches across the Mediterranean basin. Paul and Peter and the rest of the apostles believed that they were proclaiming something profoundly important pertaining to peace. While the peace of Christ does include personal, inner peace, it's important that we don't privatize the gospel and relegate peace to the individual realm, as only an isolated matter of mental and spiritual health. As we encountered it in our scripture reading last Sunday, the author of Ephesians makes the bold claim that Jesus has “broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it” (Ephesians 2:14-17).

It is unfortunate that we have “individualized” the gospel. Christ has been banished to the realm of personal and private concerns. We have squeezed Jesus into an air-tight container where he is the keeper of the keys to our own private salvation, completely forgetting that he is the cosmic Christ and that his realm is

not limited to that of the individual heart. Standing in the rich tradition of Israel's prophets, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God and casts his vision for this new world where love is the order of the day, where people offer forgiveness to one another, and where nations treat one another with equity. God is concerned with nations and war and inequities between groups of people as much as God is about your personal salvation. And while it certainly is concerned with matters of the human heart, the cross of Christ offers so much more.

As we have been talking about in our worship series on forgiveness, we have discovered that forgiveness is not simply a private matter between the sinner and God. Indeed, it is that, but it's much more. Forgiveness has a horizontal dimension as well. This is why in the Lord's Prayer we ask God to forgive us, while in the same breath pledging to forgive others. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." You see, forgiveness is God's way of achieving peace. Justice by itself is incapable of bringing peace. The "shalom," the peace the Bible speaks of not only involves the cessation of the hostilities but also the reconciliation of enemies. Theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed: "no peace is peace but that which comes through the forgiveness of sins." This is why we, the followers of Christ, who are both the recipients and practitioners of radical forgiveness, are to help lead the way. This is how we are to be the light of the world and the children of God—through the practice and the proclamation of the gospel of peace that is grounded in forgiveness.

Marcie and I recently saw a billboard on I-81 of a musclebound Jesus reaching his arms out across the wooden crossbeam of the cross. While I'm all about sharing the message of the gospel with as many people as possible, I'm not sure that the muscular messiah is a great image to perpetuate. Indeed, at the cross, the victory has been won. We can boldly testify that in the Resurrection, the gates of hell were rent asunder and God's salvation for us has been achieved. We can use the language of winners and speak about living victoriously in Christ. But does that really help folks out there for whom life is a daily struggle? How does the homeless man or woman appropriate the kingdom of God when all they can see before them is the struggle for where they are going to sleep the next night or when someone might offer them something to eat? It's hard to envision a

kingdom where the table is spread and everyone is welcome, when one is in constant survival mode. It is crucial as Christian peacemakers in the world that we are careful not to operate in a realm of inaccessible arrogance. The words and metaphors we use when we speak about God need to be considered carefully. Ultimately, we cannot speak about what God has done in Christ, without acknowledging how God has done it! We can't speak about Christ's victory on the cross without also looking at the humility of the One hanging on it—that it was at the cross where God's power was made perfect in weakness.

Even as Jesus approached Jerusalem with his disciples toward his showdown with the powers and principalities of his time, he came with great humility. In the ninth chapter of Luke, we read about a time when the "Sons of Thunder," James and John, called for Jesus to call down fire on a particular Samaritan village where they were not welcomed. But Jesus rebuked the zealous disciples for their destructive wishes. We sometimes forget that Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey—a symbol of humility—not on a warhorse—a symbol of both wealth and power. With his feet dragging the ground as he sat astride the donkey, his disciples and the children shouting Hosanna and laying palms and cloaks on the road ahead of him, some of the spectators must have had a good laugh. This? This is a king? This is the One whom you think can save you? Where's his sword and his armor? Where's his spear and his shield? Everyone knows that a conqueror rides on a warhorse, not a donkey. If he thinks he can defeat anyone with this act, you must be kidding! But this is the Prince of Peace whose motive and whose power defies our fullest human understanding.

The hope for peace that I see is where sin is called sin and where the cross is seen as the solution. The hope for peace that I see is where lust for dominance is replaced by love and where lust for vengeance is replaced by forgiveness. The hope for peace that I see is the Jesus way of choosing the cross by refusing the deathtrap of recycled revenge. The hope I see for peace is where rage is neither glorified as heroic nor satisfied in retaliation. The hope for peace I see is where the disciples of Jesus just don't watch in admiration as Jesus carries his cross but practices an imitation of the same kind of cross-bearing forgiveness. This is what we are praying for when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." It's a

prayer for God's good governance of grace and God's policy of peace. It's a prayer for grace and peace to be accomplished for all and at every level through the cross of Christ. Not cheap grace or empty peace, but the grace and peace founded on forgiveness—the kind of forgiveness that entered the world when the Son prayed upon the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

This is the kingdom of God liberated from the diminutive world of private piety. This is the kingdom of God as the answer for all the most serious problems facing our world—political corruption, genocidal war, ethnic hatred, extreme poverty, egocentric leadership, environmental abuse, sexual abuse, devalued human life, destructive addictions, crippling debt, spiritual emptiness, and every other systemic brokenness that prevents humans from being the image-bearing creatures God intended. The child has been born. The Son has been given. And for those who confess the death and resurrection of Christ we expect, as Isaiah continues his poem: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 9:7).

This kingdom comes neither by political machinations nor by military might. It does not come by ballots or bullets, by elections or intrigues, by democracies or demagogueries. The kingdom of God and its peace comes quietly, almost secretly. As Jesus parables share, the kingdom is like a seed growing and like bread rising. It comes like a long walk home. It comes in whispers and private conversations. It comes in surprising ways and in unexpected places. It comes by unconventional means and by surprising agents. It comes through the gradual transformation of hearts and minds one life at a time. The kingdom of God comes anytime and anyplace someone is willing to do the hard work of forgiveness. Forgiveness is what makes the dream of the prophets and God's greatest hopes for you and for me come alive.