

Peace

Isaiah 11: 1-10 (The peaceable Kingdom); Luke 2: 13-14 (Angels announce Peace to come on earth) ; Gospel of Mary 4: 1-11 (Acquiring Peace within)¹

You might consider this sermon a bit “heady.” Perhaps sermons around Christmas should strive to be “jolly.” I’ll be jollier Christmas Eve. However, the topic is important and I wrestle a lot with what our faith encourages us to believe, with what I believe, and I trust that you do, too.

Plato is quoted as saying: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

In contrast, our Judeo-Christian tradition is filled with prophecies, images, promises, prayers, benedictions, admonitions, and expectations of peace.

In fact, someone new to Judeo-Christianity could look at our written material and easily conclude that PEACE is the number one theme--peace and justice.

Think of Isaiah’s prophesy—a splendid poem entitled and visualized in many paintings as the “Peaceable kingdom” in which wolves lay with lambs, calves and lions were comfortable together, and toddlers safely played with snakes. This image of peace was promised 9000 years ago!

Generations of people held onto this hope: There was to be born one who would be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. When he arrived he would usher in the “peaceable kingdom.”

The legend of Jesus’ birth depicts the birth announcement as sung by a multitude of heavenly hosts. What did they sing? “Glory to God...and on earth peace...” Jesus’ birth announcement was not, “Let the lame walk,” not “All will have abundance,” not “Have a good day,” but “On earth peace.”

If all three of these (Isaiah's *poem* envisioning the peaceable kingdom, the long-term *expectation* of a Messiah, and the birth *announcement* by the angels singing "on earth peace") are not enough of a promise of peace, listen to how the apostle Paul closes his letters to the house churches: "Live in peace, and the God of love and peace be with you."

If our Christmas Cards (or e-cards) have only one word, that word is likely "Peace." As I anticipate sending such a card (I haven't begun that project yet), I confess that I wonder, "**Peace? Give me a break!**"

I ask myself, "Exactly what kind of peace is being promised? It's not obvious, for we are at war, 20 centuries after Jesus was born."

I don't know the contemporary political answer to questions of war and peace. But, I wanted a good opinion about the *biblical* promise of peace, so I telephoned a friend and colleague, Larry Welborn, who is a passionate New Testament and Early Christianity scholar. "What kind of peace was being promised?" I asked him. "Was it Peace on earth or was it a kind of inner peace for individuals?"

Larry explained that in fact, there were **two views** in the early Christian Community: (1) Some Christians focused upon an *individual's inner peace*; (2) others expected a Messiah who would *bring peace on earth*.

Larry explained that the promise in the *Gospel of Mary* was very similar to that of the *Gospel of Luke* (17:20-23). Both Mary and Luke stressed "peace within." The Luke passage is familiar to us. Jesus says "the Kingdom of God is not here/there, but *the kingdom of God is within you*." In the passage from the Gospel of Mary that we just heard this morning, Jesus says, "*Peace be with you!*" "*Acquire my peace within yourselves!*"

My passionate biblical scholar friend said Luke's and Mary's emphasis was a prominent Early Christian view: **That is, don't look for someone, some day, or some miracle out there—The Kingdom of God is here, now, within you. Accept it.**

He added that there was a second view too. In fact, that's the view that dated way back to Isaiah's peaceful kingdom image 7000 + years earlier. That view was **that peace would come when a messiah arrived to make peace happen.**

Christians today tend to pronounce that Jesus indeed *was* that long-awaited for Messiah, the one who would **bring** peace. But that's precisely what puzzles me. DID Jesus bring peace on earth **or** peace in particular persons' hearts? I confess that I am tempted to agree with Plato, that so far in human history, "Only the dead have seen the end of war." I confess, too, that I am attracted to *people* who seem to have *acquired peace within.*

What did Jesus actually say? In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene is trying to convince her friends that *what Jesus actually said to her* was: "Peace be with you. Acquire my peace within you."

Maybe what we are promised is the possibility of deep inner peace. No matter what goes on outside, our interior response can be peaceful. Even if we are in a war zone, we can experience inner peace. When all of our family is together, we can still be peaceful. If we are out of work, we can be peaceful. If the house is not yet clean and guests are arriving in two hours, we can be at peace.

Yet, is inner peace what was imagined in that lavish image of Isaiah? Is that what the legendary heavenly host of Angels meant when they said "On Earth, peace" at Jesus' birth? Is that what Paul meant when he said "Live in peace"?

Mary reports that Jesus told her to tell others that he said “Acquire my peace within you.” But let’s think about what *else* Jesus talked a lot about?

His parables are not at first glance about peace....

Instead, he was constantly introducing one set of people to the idea that another set of people are REAL and of worth, not objects. He kept trying to connect people up with each other. To adults, he pointed out that children have intrinsic worth. To Jews he pointed out that Samaritans, even female Samaritans, are worth talking with at a well.

Emerson wrote: “Let us treat the other men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are.”

Someone recently told me of driving several hours through LA traffic to attend their grandchildren’s school on “Grandparents Day.” So precious was their grandchild that they would do that. When at the school, they discovered that another grandparent drove all the way from OHIO to be there. To grandparents, clearly grandchildren are important. To stretch our sense of who is important seemed to be a big theme of Jesus.

You all are wonderful, as you respond so generously to provide meals-in-a-bag, meals in Week’s Hall, meals in the park, and showers downstairs for people in need of these things in Redlands. As you provide these services, you are Christ in the world; you are mirroring Jesus’ parables--bringing people together in love, communicating that not only grandchildren are important, but so are strangers.

Maybe in many of Jesus’ parables that *appear to be about relationships, he was demonstrating how to make peace*. Maybe the first step toward peace **is** getting connected, experiencing others not as objects or numbers, but as significant beings.

A mother told me that after her son got into some trouble in 6th grade for pushing back, when he was pushed, she and her husband required the whole family to watch a movie about Gandhi. The mother told me that though watching the movie was sort of intended as “punishment,” she realized that the effect upon her son was as if the movie had been a “reward.” The son was grateful. I was deeply touched as she told me this. The parents were saying, “Look--here’s another way to respond, when pushed.” They *introduced peace* as an alternative response for their son at a very relevant moment in his life. And he was glad to be given an alternative.

What was the way of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.? Both were deeply influenced by Jesus. Both Gandhi and King focused on *relationships*, not just the lack of war. They showed how to be nonviolent in relationships.

I, too, was grateful for a peaceful alternative offered to me at just the right time. The exact day our 2-year old daughter had the idea that our dining room wall would make a good canvas for a picture, I was cramming to prepare for a session I was asked to present on “Parenting for Peace” material. I did not want to spank her, but was not confident in other options. This material clearly showed the way: “Say ‘no,’ explain simply ‘why,’ and give an alternative.” That is, “No, crayon drawings are not for the wall. Here is a good sheet of paper.”

Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. faced inner turmoil--their biographies show us a lot about that. Yet, they also worked hard to do as Mary states Jesus insisted: to acquire inner peace. They were not hermits, experiencing peace through separation from the world. They had families who had problems. They wrestled with inner peace even as

they envisioned more peace on earth. **They moved from having deep inner peace toward visible resistance to violence in the world.**

What about you and me? We aren't Gandhi, King, or Jesus.

Are we foolish if we believe in the promise of those legendary heavenly hosts who promised peace on earth?

I have concluded that two conclusions, from our faith, are not especially helpful. One unhelpful choice relates to inner peace. It does not seem wisest to **expect inner peace, some day**, when we get a better job, when the kids grow up, when we find the right book, when we hear a good enough sermon, when we're old enough, find the right partner, or retire."

If we think this way, we might be precisely the ones to whom Mary was insistent Jesus said, "Be on your guard that no one deceives you by saying, 'look over here!' or 'Look over there!' Don't think you can wait for any other time. Peace is available now."

The other less-than-wise conclusion, I've concluded relates to world peace. That's to wait for Christ to return or to wait for another Messiah. In other words, to **wait for peace to be brought to the world from on high, once again**. I don't like this option because it makes us passive and waiting for God to do all the peace-making, when Jesus' message could not have been more clear--whatever peace he was talking about, we did not have to wait to kick it into gear!

I have also found some peace with two options that seem both wise and most compatible with our faith tradition. First, **we can expect and even work to acquire deep peace within, now**. We can seek--and expect--equanimity in relationships. This may be a life long goal, but we can seriously aim toward peace in **all** our relationships--siblings,

spouses, parents, children, colleagues, neighbors, even those who are no longer living on earth, if that's necessary. If we did this, we'd at least be part of the solution, not a problem.

Once we feel connected to others out of our own center of inner peace, our hope that we can all live peaceably together might build. Creative solutions to conflicts might emerge in community. This is a big hope, but perhaps it is not a laughable hope. It is worthy of Christian hope. In other words, it would not be embarrassing to sign a Christmas card with the one word, "Peace."

Or, we can start in the other direction. We can look at the big picture and **ponder whether in fact Christ did already bring peace.** Maybe he did. He didn't wipe war or turmoil off the earth in a magical moment. But maybe he is the Prince of Peace because **he taught us how to have peace. He didn't MAKE it happen. We humans easily want Divine intervention to zap a final solution. However, Jesus taught us how to make peace happen. He said it is available now; it is at hand, and that doesn't mean individuals alone have tranquility, but that even countries or regions or multiple faith communities could be peaceful now. Imagine if that happened, the external experience of so much peace might lead to inner peace for individuals.**

The two types of peace end up *meeting in the middle*. If we seek inner peace we are led eventually toward peaceful relationships, if we're not living in isolation. Yet, if we work toward world peace, we dwell so in the sphere of acceptance and compassion that lo and behold we'd probably deepen into peace in our own hearts. It is so much easier, really, to have compassion, than to hold onto upset.

Although Advent is about waiting for Jesus to be born, Jesus' *message* is about not waiting any longer for *something else or some other* time! The time, he said, is "now." I find that conclusion both empowering and quite a joyous responsibility.

We are familiar with these beautiful and meaningful passages from Isaiah and Luke which envision Peace: **READ Isaiah 11: 1-10; Luke 2: 13-14**

It is a pleasure now to introduce many of you to the *Gospel of Mary*.

“Gospel” just means “Good news.” At first the word “gospel” referred to the *message* preached by Jesus. After a while the word “gospel” became associated with *manuscripts* which were written down about the events around Jesus. Remember that in an oral culture documents were rare. Communities of Christians might have only several pieces of writings that they shared when they got together.

There were many different gospels that circulated—writings that were attributed to the twelve disciples or people close to Jesus, like Mary Magdalene. These were copied by hand and shared. Some communities became endeared to certain gospels and made many copies. All the writings were used fluidly—there was no sense for early Christians that some writings were “authentic” or divinely inspired more than others. Yet there were preferences and debates, since the writings did have various emphases and contained different memories. One of the emphases in the Gospel of Mary is peace.

The *Gospel of Mary* is known as a “Sayings Gospel” because it consists largely of things Jesus *said* to his disciples, and this is the case of our text today. In the text itself, Mary Magdalene tells her friends, “This is what Jesus said.”

Gospel of Mary 4: 1-11

When the Blessed One had said this, he greeted them all. “Peace be with you!” he said. “Acquire my peace within yourselves!

“Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’ For the seed of true humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.

“Go then, preach the good news of the domain. Do not lay down any rule beyond what I ordained for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else it will dominate you.”

After he said these things, he left them.

Additional info, after Scripture is read

It was not until the end of the 4th century that there was widespread agreement about what would be “in” or “out” of what Bible scholars call the “Canon”—the Bible as we know it. Yet, “the Bible as we know it today” is still fluid! You might pick up a Bible and find books like Tobit, Sirach, and Maccabees, and wonder, “What are these doing in the Bible?” Well, Roman Catholics do include these books in their canon—Protestants call them the books of the Apocrypha. Greek and Russian Orthodox Christians have even more books in their Bible. So, we can imagine how it was for early Christians in their different communities if we think about Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians in our various settings today—except there was even more fluidity.

The best way I have come to understand the “canon” of the Bible is to compare it to a clothes closet. We open our closet, and we see a lot of clothing. Which clothes do we actually WEAR? Probably a much smaller number. That set of clothes, the ones we *actually use*, we might call our clothes **canon**. People know us by that set, not the clothes that linger on hangers unused, or even forgotten. However, every now and then we pull out a piece of clothing we haven’t worn for a long time, an item that was “lost.”

That’s what has happened with biblical manuscripts, Gospels, or fragments of Gospels. The *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary* are the two most complete gospels that have been found, but fragments of 13 other gospels have also been located—of course none of anything we have for any part of the Bible is the original manuscript—everything we have was a copy which were distributed.

¹ The Gospel of Mary is now known to have been important and debated in early Christianity because of some of its theological views and because of the debate about the role of women—could women be trusted to communicate what Jesus had said to them?