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Our Peace
Isaiah 9:6; Ephesians 2:14-18
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We all grew up in a time when people sent Christmas cards through the mail. Some of you still do, but for the most part the practice has diminished over the years. As I look back on those cards, the most common theme was "Peace on Earth." It was something we all longed for, hoped for, prayed for. And believed that the next year would be better. But it never is.

Our world desperately craves and needs peace. How do you have peace on earth when violence is normal? When mass murder becomes an every day occurrence?

That saying "Peace on Earth" surrounds the birth of Jesus when the angels appeared to the shepherds saying, "and on earth peace among those whom his favor rests."

Prince of Peace. This is a title given to Jesus. If the scriptures say Jesus is the image of the invisible God and in him all things hold together, and if this Prince of Peace is the light shining in the darkness, then how come we don't have peace on earth? Ever?

What does it mean that Jesus has this title Prince of Peace? Does it mean anything? Or, is it just a title that sounds really great?

The name "Prince of Peace" comes from the Isaiah passage listed in your bulletin. Isaiah 9:6 (You recognize it from Handel's Messiah) "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

This was originally spoken to a king of Judah (King Ahaz) when he was afraid of a military invasion. The king is considering forming a political alliance with one of their enemies in order to save themselves. The prophet Isaiah comes to this King and says, "Do not form a military alliance with anyone. Rather, trust God. There is One coming, a child, who shall usher in endless peace.

As Christians, we believe this child is Jesus. But where is the peace, O Prince of Peace?

Our other scripture passage in Ephesians helps us out. Before we read it, let us pray.

Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Imagine this scene: the first Christians are meeting in homes. They receive Paul's letter and it is read to them. Keep in mind, they live under a Roman brand of peace; it's an enforced peace through military dominance. Anyone who challenged this Roman brand of peace was threatened with the terror of crucifixion. That's one way to have peace, isn't it?

So, Paul's letter is read, and they hear these words "For Christ himself has brought peace to us" (verse 14). I like other versions better that say, "Jesus is our peace.'

Those first Christians hear these words, and perhaps, there is quick intake of breath as they hear that Jesus brings peace, not the Roman Government. Maybe some look at the door to see if anyone outside has heard because this pronouncement borders on treason. Rome is not peace; Jesus is our peace.

Paul goes on. Read verses 14-18.

The first Christians understand that Jesus was not a military Messiah. He brought a difference brand of peace, not a forced one, not a military one, but a

reconciling one. Peace I leave with you, “Jesus said, “my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.’ (John 14:27)

Here is what is happening in this passage: the first Christians, the first followers of Jesus, were Jewish. But God’s surprise is that the Gentiles are becoming followers of Jesus, too. In that culture, the Jews and Gentiles (non-Jewish people) did not associate with one another. This includes Roman soldiers.

This has been going on for thousands of year. And all of sudden, they are following the same person of Jesus Christ. What do they do? Do they form two different churches like we do today? Jewish followers of Jesus in one church and the Gentile followers of Jesus in another? Keep the like-minded people together?

No, Paul says, you are to be together because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross. Jesus made two people into one people. This does not mean that the Gentiles become Jews, or the Jews become Gentiles. Rather, both Jew and Gentiles became united in Christ as Jew and Gentile.

Jesus brought peace between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus reconciled both groups to God, and Jesus reconciled both groups to each other. Jesus ended the hostility between the two groups by putting it to death on the cross. Jesus broke down the wall between the two groups by bringing the Good News of Peace.

This is untamed, radical, revolutionary stuff. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brought peace between multi-ethnic groups of people. Their task was to show the world how to live in peace. Shouldn’t that be our task today as well?

Christ is our peace. Christ reconciled us to God. What a gift we have been given. However, Jesus came not only to bring peace between God and humans, Jesus came to bring peace between humans. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. The Prince of Peace lives within us, therefore we are called to be Peacemakers.

Peace begins with us, right here, in our church community, in our families, in our neighborhoods. Working for peace right here. We can't take on the whole world (that is just too overwhelming), but we can bring peace right here.

For example, it is here that we practice forgiveness because it has been extended to us by the Prince of Peace. It is here that we practice reconciliation because it has been extended to us by the Prince of Peace. As God's people we have the opportunity to model this for a world, which sees it almost nowhere else.

Back in Minnesota, I had a group of people that I did a lot of outdoor activities together. We backpacked in the mountains, cross-country skied together, canoed in the Boundary Waters, biked together. It was a group of people I loved dearly. Most of them were not Christians.

Then one time, I made a mistake. I didn't handle a relationship issue very well in our group. One of them approached me and expressed great anger with me. I expressed sorrow, said I was sorry, and asked for forgiveness. It was not extended to me, and my relationship with them was broken forever.

Jesus left the church here on earth to show the world what it looks like to love and forgive. We've seen great examples of this forgiveness in the last couple years. The Quakers who forgave the killer of their children. The woman who forgave the killer of the people having a Bible study together in Charleston. These people were being peacemakers by extending God's love and grace and mercy. The world was stunned by such forgiveness.

We are to treat everyone like Jesus really did die for them. We should be the greatest lover of people on earth because we have been loved the greatest. When you are in a conflict, remember your identity. We are a beloved child of God who has received grace and forgiveness, and therefore, we are called to extend that grace and forgiveness to that person who has hurt us, or angered us, or betrayed us.

We are called to live in peace together and show it to the world.

I illustrate by making a salad: I found this great recipe for a salad online. (For those of you reading this, as I spoke, I demonstrated the making of this salad in front of the congregation.)

The salad I will make represents the church. I have lettuce from the Farmer's market in town. The lettuce is grown in Arizona. I will add some candied pecans to this salad. These pecans are grown right here in Green Valley. We certainly have people in this church who have lived here a long time.

But then I throw into this salad ingredients from other places:

- Dried cherries from the East coast. These cherries are tart. Sometimes people from the east coast can be rather tart.
- Pears from Mexico (what if God brought other ethnic groups in our community? Think about those Jews and Gentiles. Reconciliation between two ethnic groups coming together and calling themselves the church)
- Goat cheese from Georgia (now, this is different. Think about those people who are rather different from you)

You mix all these different ingredients together – all these people with different opinions, personalities, cultures, theologies, yet coming together to form a great salad, or Body of Christ.

But then add the final ingredient: the salad dressing made up of vastly different ingredients: balsamic vinegar made in Italy, maple syrup produced in Vermont, mustard from Minnesota, olive oil from a grove in California. These ingredients come together to make the most awesome dressing.

We add it to the salad, and dressing binds us together. It is like the grace of God. We do life together. We mix it up together, and we get all next to one another. A salad bowl church. We learn to live in peace, and it tastes delicious. Then we take it out in the world and say, "Have some. Taste and see that the Lord is good."

Someday, scripture says there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Where Jesus, our peace, will reign, and there will be truly no wars, no tears, no violence, real peace.

Until then, if every church in Green Valley, if every church in America, if every church in every nation in the world practiced peace, and then brought it out into our broken world that so desperately needs peace (taste and see that the Lord is good), we could, with the help of God and Jesus our peace, make a great dent in the violence of this world.

Jesus is our peace. Amen and amen.

Charge and Blessing

The peace of Christ be with you all (*and also with you*).

Turn to several people near you and extend the peace of Christ.

At the end of each of Paul's letters to the church, he extends peace. I extend them to you this day:

In Galatians, he says, "May the God of peace teach you to walk in the paths of peace."

At the end of Ephesians: "May the peace of God live between you as brothers and sisters in Christ."

At the end of Colossians: "May the God of peace rule in your hearts."

Receive the blessing...Now may the God of hope fill you with all peace and joy as you trust in him, so you will overflow with hope because of our Prince of Peace.

And all God's people said...Amen.