

The Cry for Peace

sermon digest

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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Revisit with me, if you will, the document so many of us signed a couple of weeks ago—the Covenant of Grace around which our church gathers and for which we are named. At one particularly strategic point, it reads: “We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world (2 Cor. 5:19), yet we set no limit on the reach of God’s love or the activity of God beyond the experience and faith of Christians.” Our emphasis often falls on the latter part. We say up front and we say without apology what our lifelong experience of God and our neighbor has taught us. We do not have exclusive claim to God. Others, who do not name the name of Christ, know and pray and serve God; and the God we know in Christ hears their prayers and receives their devotion and service just as God hears our prayers and receives our prayers and service. Our acknowledgment of that truth—no, *stronger*—our *embracing* that truth does not, however, diminish the opening words with which we begin: “We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world.” Our acceptance of others does not lessen the centrality of that claim. I would even suggest that it is our very experience of God in Christ that opens us to that claim. Our encounter with the Christ who levels the walls of hostility human beings so casually and so quickly build against one another, opens us to our neighbor, our brother or sister who is different from us.

But be sure. The very claim that God was in Christ is audacious. Here I am not talking about all of the fine theological points that one must get in line in order to be acceptable to those intent on a hard and fast checklist of orthodoxy. We may differ greatly in the words that we use and in the points on that list to which we are willing to subscribe. As we so often say, our covenant embrace of one another does not mean that we “walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform.” But at bottom, there is this claim, this statement of faith: God was in Christ; and if we take it seriously, during this time of year, during this time of Advent, we relive God’s coming in Christ and seek with every fiber of our being to know and live out what it means for God to come to us in the here-and-now, what it means for God to come to us in the very world in which we live.

This claim of Advent, this claim of Christmas that God was in Christ is, as former Harvard Chaplain/Pastor Peter Gomes puts it, “the outrageous claim by which we are known and defined, and it is a scary claim.”

It is a scary claim because it means that God has taken us so seriously that we must take ourselves seriously and God seriously—and that claim is too much for this world to take, or at least for it to take as seriously as it ought [Pulpit Digest, Oct-Dec 2000, p. 82].

Perhaps it is this very scariness, this dis-ease with what it might require of us that leads us to give society the permission to trivialize the Christmas story and its earth shaking message “so that it becomes just another winter’s tale—like the *Nutcracker*, or a well-dressed department store window.” We consciously allow the trivial to dominate this time of year, Gomes suggests, in an effort to flee the audacious claims that taking it all seriously places upon us.

We actually like the harmless baby and the silly sheep; we have turned a tin ear to the carols. We sing them as so much background noise to holiday-making, and we are surprised when anyone takes offense at any of the signs and symbols with which we are so familiar. Why should anybody be concerned about nativity scenes on the courthouse lawn, or stars, or Christmas carols, or even Christmas music? Everybody understands, including Christians, that they are all just so much cultural paraphernalia” [Gomes].

Is that the way it is with us? Is Advent, is Christmas just so much froth, just so much shallow merriment that means little more than a break in routine? Is it just a brief acquaintance with the magic of wishful thinking? Or is there something deep within scripture, within faith that pulls us up short and opens us again to the mystery of God’s love? Is there something here that reinterprets our life and our world and sets us on mission to translate the hope and peace, joy and love that we encounter here into realities in the world where we live?

God’s coming always encounters the world as it is. God’s coming in Christ then and God’s coming in Christ now and God’s coming always encounters the realities of our world. God’s coming is not just the story of happiness and light. It is the story, too, of the darkness of this world encountered by that light. Advent does not turn a blind eye to the darkness into which God came then or comes today. Advent looks the darkness squarely in the eye and proclaims a light that the darkness, trying with all its might, cannot extinguish.

Episcopal priest and author Fleming Rutledge recalls Christmas cards produced some years ago by the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities. In 1968, the festive orange-red cover of the first card featured the words of the Benedictus: "From on high our God will bring the rising Sun." Not surprising. What one would expect of a Christmas card. Opening the card, however, the reader is jerked to attention by a stark black-and-white photograph of a small African-American child caught by a ray of sunlight as he sits listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard. Alongside the photo, a continuation of the verse from the cover: ". . . to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." In like manner, the card's cover the following year trumpeted the words of John the Baptist: "There is One among you" and inside, another black-and-white photograph, this time of a Vietnamese child with the blank, stunned expression on her face of a child in wartime. Alongside the picture were words completing those on the cover, ". . . whom you do not recognize" ["The Two Faces of Advent," *Christian Century*, Dec 1, 1999]

Advent, you see, has two sides. It is about rapturous joy and expectation as the light of God breaks in upon us, but Advent shines God's light on the suffering world into which it breaks. Advent, you might say, is a paradox. It is, in Fleming's words, about "the coming triumph of God manifest precisely in the darkness of this present evil age." Advent and Christmas are about unspeakable joy, but they are also about unbearable suffering and injustice. They are about peace, but they are also about the tragic realities of war and human tragedy. Advent and Christmas are about the world in which we live being confronted with new hope, new expectation for the future. To hide ourselves from the sad realities of our world or to dismiss hope for the transformation of those realities is to miss the full truth of what happens when God enters our world.

Create within your mind's eye the opening scene of a movie. Picture the landscape of a vast wilderness; and in the midst of that wilderness, a lone prophet. Picture one who knows he is going against the current of popular opinion and yet presses on anyway. Picture one seeking to reawaken hope in a people in whom despair and cynicism have snuffed out every semblance of hope. For almost half a century, the people have languished in exile. Most have never seen the homeland for which the older generation still yearns. A prophet daring to speak of peace, daring to speak of a return home is a prophet who will be quickly dismissed. And who can blame the naysayer? Even the thought of a trip back home is out of the question. A trip of 900 miles along known trade routes or a long and arduous trek through the desert—either way, it is a foreboding idea. It would be, to use the terminology of our day, a fight for survival in a situation of extreme reality.

And yet the call comes to the prophet: "Comfort, O comfort my people!" Before you rush to imagine the prophet sympathetically patting the people on their backs and encouraging them to curl up in their discomfort and piteously live there, notice the imperatives that are quick to follow: Speak! Cry out! Make clear! Make straight! Preach! Get up! Do not be afraid! Speak! To use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's terminology, there is no cheap grace here. The way home will not be without peril. Its challenges are depicted in the mountains that must be leveled and the rough and crooked places that must be negotiated. It involves trust in a God adequate for the challenge. It is about one who has made a way in the desert before; it is about one who calls us into the way of peace that we may make peace in the way that we go.

God's coming commissions us to the work of peace. Advent and Christmas do make audacious claims upon our lives and upon our priorities. They call us to anticipate that our lives and the world in which we live can and will be different. The coming of God stands in direct confrontation with all that is evil, all that is unjust, all that is violent, all that robs human beings of dignity and freedom. The coming of God does not leave things as they are. It does not leave us in a pool of despair, buried under the crushing weight of anxiety and guilt. It beckons us toward a new future and it calls us to responsibility for that future. It is about peace, but not a cheap peace. It is not the peace of a gated community, closed off from all that is wrong in our world. It is not just peace for me in my one-on-one relationship with God or peace simply for *my* family, *my* city, *my* nation. It is about the strength and the sense of calling to challenge evil, injustice and suffering.

Peace is proclaimed throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures. The peace, the *shalom* of God, is more than just the absence of warfare or tension. It is about fullness, wholeness and completion. It is the product of justice and righteousness. It is gift, and it is task. The peace of Christ issues forth in mission, and it is a mission as wide and inclusive as the love of Christ.

The peace of Christ, you see, is about Darfur, Afghanistan, the growing disparity of the accumulation of wealth. It is about greed and cynicism and the blame game that turns us into warring camps. It is about the malnourished child who cannot compete in our classrooms because she is hungry. It is about the veteran

and the mentally ill who roam our streets. It is about the mother who knows no peace because her child is sick and has no access to health care. It is about those heroes of the faith who work with Heifer International to provide a family with the livestock and the training they need to lift themselves out of the grinding, daily reality of extreme poverty. It is about Christians who are good stewards of their responsibility as citizens and lobby our nation's leaders on behalf of the hungry because "God's grace in Jesus Christ moves us to help our neighbors, whether they live in the next house, the next state, or the next continent"

[Bread.org/about us].

Advent is about waiting for God, but it is not about passive waiting. It is about seriously seeking to discern who God is and where God is at work and repositioning the priorities of our lives exactly there. It is about preparing the way for peace and justice and wholeness in the world that God loves. It is about peace; and it is about hoping and working still.