

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 2, 2018 - Advent 1
Calm and Bright
Title: Sleep in Peace
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-4, 9:2, 6-7
Luke 1:68-79

The world around us is already deep into Christmas and I'm starting to feel the panic because I have done practically no Christmas shopping and time is swiftly flying by. Yet, in the church we are in a season called Advent – a time of preparation, a time of anticipation. It is a time when we are intentional about preparing for the coming of Christ.

We all know that Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago, and as a child, I thought we were supposed to be surprised and get excited about Jesus being born, and I never quite understood how we could be surprised about something that we knew had already happened a long time ago. But it's not really about being surprised by Jesus' birth. It's more about remembering the surprising impact his birth had on the world. It's about the transforming impact his presence can have on our lives and our world when we stop to remember; when we stop to relive; when we stop to ask what this means in our lives and the life of the world today.

The world that we live in today, is similar in many ways to the world into which Jesus came so many years ago. It was the time of the great Pax Romana or Great Roman Peace. It was a period of about 200 years when there was relative stability and peace – or more accurately an absence of war. For the Romans, peace was the “rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist”ⁱ – when there was nobody left to fight. Augustus tried to convince the Romans that the prosperity they could achieve in the absence of warfare was better for

the Empire than the potential wealth and honor acquired when fighting a risky war.

However, Caesar's peace was created by suppressing human rights, so the Jewish people living under the thumb of the Roman Empire, yearned for freedom. Isaiah's words from long before, offered hope. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." This passage from the Prophet Isaiah came from a time when the wicked and weak king Ahaz had reigned. It was a dark time for the Jewish people with constant threats of foreign invasion. But into that darkness, the prophet announced a word of hope and promise, a word of brightness and light, when the Messiah would come.ⁱⁱ

Many years later, they clung to the words of the Prophet Isaiah as they continued to look for a messiah who would save them. Life under the Pax Romana was not a peaceful existence. It was one of poverty, very few human rights, and little real freedom. Rome controlled them and for the most part no one threatened that control because all the people around them had been subdued and overcome. Both Matthew and Luke use some of Isaiah's words as they talk about Jesus coming.

Throughout Advent we will see the image of light – the light of stars, the light of candles, light that makes it possible to follow a path. We put lights on our Christmas trees. We put the light of candles in our windows. We light the candles of an Advent Wreath. On Christmas Eve, we will pass the light from one to another until the whole sanctuary will be lit by candle light.

"Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world.' (John 8:12). The light is carried into the worship service as a symbol of Jesus' coming into the presence of the worshipping community." We typically have two candles on

our altar “to point out that Jesus was both a human being and God. At the end of service, the light is carried out into the world to show that Jesus Christ is for people everywhere.” It is a symbol of the light of Jesus Christ going out into the world where believers are to serve.ⁱⁱⁱ

During Advent this year, at the close of worship, I will be inviting you to turn and face the center aisle while the candle – the light of Christ – is taken out into the world. As a child I wanted to take that light out into the world. I loved to see how long I could keep my candle burning after the Christmas Eve service. My dream was to keep it burning all the way home, but as you might imagine, IF I managed to keep it lit until I walked out the church doors, it would usually blow out as soon as I got outside.

Whether the physical light continues to burn or not, we become the light that is to burn in the world, to pierce the darkness, to light the path, to show the way.

In our Gospel reading, we heard the words of Zechariah, the priest and father of the one who would be called “John the Baptist”. He pronounced that John would be the prophet preparing the way for the messiah. John would prepare the way for Jesus, the one who would fulfill the words of the Isaiah and “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” and guide their feet into the way of peace.

The verse that we whispered this morning from the carol “Silent Night” proclaims that “All is calm, all is bright” and that the child will “sleep in heavenly peace.” This peace is very different than the kind of peace that existed during the great Pax Romana.

The peace that Jesus brings and proclaims is not about a victory in war and an enforced peace or cessation of violence. It is about a peace, a calm, a brightness that allows us to be focused on the fullness and

wholeness of life. When Isaiah talks about beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks –about turning weapons of war into tools of gardening, growing and nurturing - it is an invitation to use our ingenuity, creativity, and energy for good. It’s about building up the human capacity to reach across divides and find our common heritage.

One of the great stories of reaching across the divide comes from World War I. I shared with you at the beginning of our worship time the story of an unofficial, spontaneous, and short-lived truce that has become legendary. In 2014, on the 100th anniversary of this time, Kathleen and Chris Loughlin of PictureWise Productions in the United Kingdom produced a television special to commemorate this Christmas truce. “They televised a candlelight Christmas Eve service from two congregations - one in Britain and one in Germany – symbolizing the movement to peace from that day a century before. They featured quotes pulled from soldier’s letters recounting their experience of the truce.”^{iv}

“Here is what some of them said about what happened:

Voice 1: “The Germans started singing and lighting candles about 7.30 on Christmas Eve, and one of them challenged anyone of us to go across for a bottle of wine. One of our fellows accepted the challenge and took a big cake to exchange.”

Voice 2: “We came from our mouseholes and saw the English advancing towards us and waving cigarette boxes, handkerchiefs and towels. They had not rifles with them and there we know it could only be a greeting and that it was alright.”

Voice 3: “We had a church service and sang hymns, we met the Germans midway between the trenches and wished each other a ‘Merry

Christmas'. We exchanged buttons, badges, caps, etc, and we all sang songs."

Voice 4: "They gave us cigars and cigarettes and toffee and they told us they didn't want to fight but had to. Some could speak English as well as we could, and some had worked in Manchester. The Germans seem very nice chaps who were awfully sick of the war."

Voice 5: "We were able to move about the whole of Christmas Day with absolute freedom. It was a day of peace in war.... It is only a pity that it was not a decisive peace."

The Host continued, "In a letter sent from the front on 29th Dec 1914, Staff sergeant Clement Barker reports that during the truce British soldiers went out and recovered 69 dead comrades in No Man's Land and buried them. Sgt Barker also reports that an impromptu football match then broke out between the two sides when a ball was kicked out from the British lines into No Man's Land. Another soldier writes about how the truce came to an end at 3pm on Christmas day when a German officer called his men in:"

Voice 6: "A German soldier said to me 'today (Christmas Day) nice; tomorrow, shoot.' As he left me, he held out his hand, which I accepted, and said: 'Farewell, comrade.' With that we parted...."

The Host continued with these words that are important to us today, "Remembering this truce a century on isn't just about what happened then. It's about what we, God's children and followers of the Prince of Peace, can do now, in the midst of conflict and fear in the 21st century. What can we do today, right now - [this] Christmas, to help our families, our communities, our world hang on to our humanity in the face of brutality? What can we do to continue to love one another and to care about those we don't even know, while so much around us shouts at us to hate and fear and give up

on the real possibilities for peace and reconciliation? How can we meaningfully pray for those we call enemies today as well as those who were enemies in 1914?”

He continued, “As two congregations – one in Britain and one in Germany - we are saying ‘yes’ to the possibility of peace in a world of conflict by sharing a Christmas Eve connection with those we once called “enemy”. Even though our countries have not been in conflict for nearly 70 years – we remember that we once feared each other, even hated each other. Even so, then - as now - our congregations were full of people who loved life, longed for peace, dreamed about a better future for their families, and struggled with the challenge of how to walk faithfully with God. People just like us.”

Now in 2018, things haven’t changed much. Our communities, our churches and our world are torn and divided about many issues. “Families fight, politicians argue.” The Internet, tweets, posts, blogs, and media reports as well as individual posts often spread ignorance and hate. Sometimes it feels that hope, peace, love, and light are missing from our lives.

Marcia McFee who wrote the design for this worship series, suggests that perhaps this Christmas could be a time of ceasefire from our sources of conflict. A ceasefire – not as something imposed. A peace – not as a lack of violence because voices have been silenced or overcome, but instead a peace that is within our hearts. A peace that helps to create a silence so that we are able to hear the voices of others – especially the voices of those we usually do not hear.

Thursday night, Bishop Devadhar reminded and urged those of us at his meeting with the district to have a heart at peace, rather than a heart at

war. He reminded us about a book “Anatomy of Peace” – that our Book Group read and discussed last spring. We thought it was important enough that we talked about trying to involve many more in a discussion about it. It is a book that urges us to have a heart of peace so that we can hear voices that speak differently than ours, voices that we might hear as voices of enemies if we have a heart that is at war.

As Marcia studied the “Silent Night” hymn some of the words that we used and will continue to use at the beginning of our worship formed in her mind; words that speak to the hope and promise that we so desperately want and need.

“It was the night when Peace was born
and just as now the world was torn
but all was calm, and all was bright,
the star above gave out its light.”

In the image of the star of our faith narrative, God’s guidance continues to shine if we have eyes to see. God’s peace, joy, love and hope will spread if we claim our role, opportunity, and responsibility to receive it, to tend it, and to pass it on just like we pass on the light of the candles on Christmas Eve, light that slowly grows to fill the sanctuary with light.^v

As we explore the hymn “Silent Night” in this Advent and Christmas season, it is a way of “shining a light” on the power of reaching out across divides. It is a way of getting silent enough to listen to the “hopes and fears of all the years” and especially of those we tend to cast as the enemy (or simply “different”) for one reason or another.

My hope is that just like that one person who issued the initial invitation to come out of their ditches and connect face to face, we will each take the opportunity and responsibility to reach out across divides and

connect because we are all humans with common human needs. Deep down, I believe, we all have the desire for peace for ourselves and our children. It might just change the course of history, if only for a day.^{vi}

As we pray, I want to share with you again the words of our choir's anthem, words that usher us into this time of seeking peace, love, joy, and hope in this Advent Season. Let us pray:

"We Need a Silent Night in Here. It's the season of the year we come to celebrate. In all our ways, from different paths we come to be. Yet when we look around us, we see divisions everywhere. Even friends and family can't seem to agree.

"There are empty chairs for some around the table now. Loved ones gone, others just can't find their way. But we lift our hopeful eyes with open hearts and soul and mind. In whatever way we know you and however we might pray.

"Now we pray that we can find our shared humanity. Knowing what affects just one affects us all. When the darkness hides the light, it is the star that shines so bright.

"With the courage to be change, lift us up before we fall. In the silence renew our sight. Help us see you shining in the night. Still the noise the world can give. Come teach us how to live.

"We need a silent night in here. We need your presence to come near. Give us the hope we need and the peace we seek. We need a silent night in here."^{vii} Amen.

ⁱ Wikipedia: Pax Romana: Momigliano, Arnaldo (1942). "[The Peace of the Ara Pacis](#)" (PDF). *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. 5: 228–231. doi:10.2307/750454. JSTOR 750454.

ⁱⁱ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/isaiah/9-2.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/why-do-we-light-and-extinguish-candles-during-worship>

^{iv} Script of WW1 tribute courtesy of PictureWise Productions <http://www.picturewise.co.uk>

^v McFee, Marcia, "Calm and Bright" [Worship Design Studio](#)

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} © 2018 Marsha Moors-Charles Shared through [Worship Design Studio](#)
