

They all knew that a strike team was undoubtedly on the way. Holed up in a room just outside the city, danger and the threat of violence hung heavy in the air, like that thick humidity just before a hard rain. He had stirred up too much trouble. He didn't commit any crime. No laws were broken. But, he was most certainly an effective activist, offending the powerful, disturbing the elite, empowering the lowly and liberating the meek. The movement was rapidly gaining traction with a growing number of unpredictable undesirables. There was no chance the authorities could or would look the other way. They had too much to lose. He would not resist arrest, even though he knew that once in custody it would swiftly lead to his public humiliation and ultimately, government-sanctioned execution.

Even with the acute strained tension of this long, final night he had one last chance to make an impression on the ones who would remain. The dim firelight flickered in the frightened eyes of his oldest followers. He held their worried gaze and said this...

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

This is the peace that Paul wrote about, "*the peace of God that passes all understanding*". This peace that Jesus offers is a mystical understanding, a comprehension that there is more going on here than the unfolding drama threatening to collapse everything we care about. No matter how bad things appear to be, Jesus invites us to look beyond one reality and into another. He was clearly in a horrible situation as he said these words, and Paul writes about this kind of transcendent peace even while confined in prison.

You see the peace of Christ is not the peace the world gives. The peace we identify with is so often dependent on other people or our environment or current circumstances. Only when my spouse is peaceful am I able to relax. When my boss is in a good mood, all is well in my world too. If my aging parent or child is suffering I lose all serenity. I often surrender my peace to anxiety because the conditions in my life are not what I want them to be. It could be about an uncomfortable situation, personal finances, or an impossible schedule. Looming deadlines keep me up at night. Yet, what God offers us is a peace that is deeper. A peace that is so deeply rooted in our being that it bends in the hurricanes of life yet remains firmly planted. It's actually being peace. Can you imagine maintaining your own sense of calm in the middle of someone else's chaos, or trusting God so much that any anxiety quickly dissipates with simple prayer?

¹ John 14:27

I think finding and receiving this transcendent peace of God is a choice that everyone can make. Choosing real peace is only dependent on our ability to completely trust that God can and will bring peace to every situation. How else could Paul write from his cell, “*Rejoice in the Lord always*”, and “*do not worry about anything*”? How else could Jesus say, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*” even as the Roman guards surrounded them? They know that no matter what, that God is with them always. The Holy Presence is not dependent on our holiness, righteousness, or correct moral thinking or action. God is present in all things and continually drawing all things into the eternal flow of life...even us...even them...always and forever.

The ADVENT promise is the coming of Jesus, the *Prince of Peace*.² As we wait with expectant hope and heightened anticipation, there is also a sense of invitation here, an invitation to wait not only for the coming Messiah but more importantly an invitation that waits on YOUR response, like that Evite in your inbox that keeps popping up at the most inconvenient time, you’ve got to choose and RSVP. But this is both a thrilling and a terrifying proposition. It’s like a surprise wedding proposal. You know your life will be radically changed by your answer. When you really understand the enormity of the Advent of “God with us” - God with you, it’s a frightening proposal to participate in the Divine Dance. Jesus invites us to enter into an actual metaphysical, mystical relationship with God by following the Way of Jesus. To hear this invitation is to come to a moment of truth. That’s why they call it the “come to Jesus” moment.

What is promised to followers of Christ, the ones who say yes to a relationship with God, is an experience of astonishing transformation. There is

- A spiritual peace with God, because you know God is for you.
- The emotional peace of God, because you know God is always with you.
- And relational peace on earth, because you are rooted deeply in a peace that is not dependent solely on the things of the earth.

This is more than a metaphysical abstraction. The peace of Christ can actually be brought into existence and lived out everyday by anyone. It’s impossible to *think* your way into this new way of being, but, you can *act* your way into a new way of thinking. Paul continues in his letter to the Philippians with some practical advice. He writes,

² Isaiah 9:6

*whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence and
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.*

This is how you act your way into a new way of thinking. Every thought you have, every word that comes out of your mouth, every action you make has enormous influence in the whole, and we'll get to that idea more in a few weeks, but the only way we are ever going to be able to experience peace in the world is if we first find true peace in our hearts. This is the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that Jesus invites us to receive; the peace that keeps us thinking on whatever is true, honorable, pure, pleasing and excellent.

This is God's desire for us; to live at peace even in the horror, tragedy and disappointment that perennially swirls about in our chaotic world. Even in the dark and shadowed places, God will show us the way. In Luke's Gospel Zechariah prophesizes this Advent hope,

*Because of our God's tender mercy,
the dawn will break upon us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."³*

During this first week of Advent, I invite you to contemplate your own sense of inner peace. Examine how your well-being may sometimes be hijacked by other people or connected to the current circumstances of your life. Can you practice an unwavering trust that, in the end, God will redeem everything? It's an open invitation, no matter who you are, where you are, what you have done or failed to do, but first, you must humbly and bravely receive the gift.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."⁴

³ Luke 1:78-79

⁴ John 14:27