

“The Advent Conspiracy—The Way to Peace”

We're going to talk about peace today. Peace is a big concept around the birth of Jesus and around his life. Peace. I need some peace on earth. Seeing what happened last week in Wisconsin as 23 high school students were held at gunpoint. Hearing about another suicide bomber killing 6 more U.S. troops in Iraq. We need some peace. Then there are the families in our church that are anxious about illnesses. One of our staff members is having cancer surgery this week. Two close friends are struggling with aging parents and knowing how best to care for them. For a number of families here today, they're facing their first Christmas without somebody they love either because of a death or divorce. We want peace.

Some of you are not at peace with God. You wonder if he's gunning for you, working against you. If he's all about wrath, instead of love. You wonder if you've done something to really tick him off, or if he's just left you. You want some peace.

For lots of people this time of year there's an anxious feeling, and unsettled feeling, not much peaceful feeling, all the things to do, all the places to be, all the stuff to pack. There's a never ending supply of tension, anxiety, pressure to go, go, go, mixed with some of the financial tension of our times. Rather than living with sense of constant peace, it seems like most people I know are full of anxiety, tension, and pressure!

Into all of that, Isaiah 9:6 is a prophetic verse that points to Jesus Christ. It was written 700 years before Jesus' birth, and it refers to the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Messiah who would come some day. It says **“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” (Isaiah 9:6, NIV).**

I hope that today, you and I can find a way to actually experience the peace that this Prince brings. I hope by understanding this we can experience it as an integral part of our lives. But it begs the question, if Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and you've chosen to follow him, then why don't we experience that peace in more real ways in our lives?

Last week we started this series called the Advent Conspiracy. The word conspiracy is probably one of the last words you'd associate with Christmas, the birth of Jesus, but conspiracy means to overturn something, to overthrow something. Sometimes a conspiracy is seen as a plot. Well, listen, the birth of Jesus, God in human form, was definitely a plot. It was a plot to open the pathway to God for good. The birth of Jesus was a conspiracy to overthrow darkness, to overthrow death, to overthrow the sin and the illusions that enslave people. It was a plot to bring hope, and peace, and joy and love. Make no mistake about it, Advent was definitely a conspiracy!

Last week Pastor Mark talked about the hope. Today I want to talk about peace. 700 years before Jesus' birth the prophet Isaiah said he would be called the Prince of Peace. Then when Jesus was born an army of angels makes the first announcement to a bunch of night-shift shepherds, shouting, **“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” (Luke 2:14).**

Peace was woven into Jesus' life and teachings. And some of his last words were about peace. In John 14, just before he was captured and crucified he said, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me...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” (John 14:1 and 27, NIV).** Jesus came offering peace and we want it. We want it mentally, relationally, for our future, in our relationship with God. We want peace.

For us to make God's peace our own, there are some things we need to get our brains around. And we start to look at this it's really important to watch how God's picture of peace does not mean that you won't have difficulties or hardships in your life. God's picture of peace is the sense of calm and confidence in the **midst** of the difficulties of life. When some storms are raging in my outer world, in my inner world I can still have peace. That's God's picture of peace. It's what we want. But as with all things that we so desperately want, peace is not easy to own. Let's jump in by looking at what peace means.

“The Bible’s take on peace...being at peace with God”. The word “peace” in the New Testament has several different meanings. For the most part it’s used to mean the absence of hostility. The New Testament talks about peace between nations, between friends, in churches, but one of its biggest meanings is the end of conflict between human beings and God. It’s the idea that there would be an absence of hostility, an absence of war, between me and God.

Colossians 1:20 says, **“By him [Jesus] God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross” (Colossians 1:20, NLT).** Because of what Jesus did on the cross, I don’t have to be at war with God. I can have peace with God because of what Jesus did on the cross.

It’s important that we get this. God has always been attempting to connect with people. God has always loved humanity. Some people want to say that Jesus somehow changed God’s mind from wrath to love. No. God’s mind toward humanity has always been love. What Jesus did was embody that love. What Jesus did was pay for my mistakes and yours. There are consequences for my sin, and Jesus took those consequences for me. I don’t have to live enslaved by shame. I don’t have to look at God as my enemy.

Listen, God is not at war with you. God is not trying to destroy you. He’s doing all kinds of things to tell you that he loves you and wants the best for you; and to find that best, you follow Jesus with your whole life. Maybe you get that already, but chances are, somebody you know doesn’t. God’s counting on you to tell people around you, “God is not at war with you. Let him love you.” Do you need to hear that? Does somebody in your world need to hear that? Tell them. Please tell them.

The picture of God’s peace isn’t just about my relationship with God. It’s also about my relationship with others. **“The Bible’s take on peace...being at peace with others”.** This is a more difficult challenge. A lot of people say, “Me and God, we’re tight. It’s other people that are the problem.” But, listen, that’s not good enough. Your overall sense of wellbeing, of peace is related to your relationship with others. Your connection to God is related to the level of peace you cultivate with others. Romans 12:18 says, **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18, NIV).**

I hear it a lot around this time of year. A pretty common scenario. “I’m going home for Christmas and my sister is going to be there and she just annoys the snot out of me! She’s rude, and insensitive, and smells like cabbage. And she really knows how to push my buttons. I’m really gonna let her have it this year!” I say something like, “Are you a follower of Jesus?” “Well, yeah.” “Then as far as it depends on you, live at peace with one another. You choose to let her comments just roll off. You choose to be positive when she goes negative. You choose not to retaliate when she gets rude.” “But Aaron, I can only stand so much!” “Right, I know, and there is only so much you can do, but if it is possible, as far as it depends on you. Live at peace.” Living at peace means we offer grace, upon grace, upon grace. Just like God has offered us.

What Jesus did allows us to be at peace with God. And what Jesus did calls us to be at peace with others. That’s what he was getting at when he said, **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”** The thing that catches my eye here is that Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the peace-lovers. At some level everybody loves peace because peace is the foundation of prosperity. So many good things happen in an atmosphere of peace—so we love peace.

But look at this. Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are the peace-lovers.” He said blessed are the **peacemakers**. Loving peace is easy! Anybody can love peace. Working toward peace is another thing altogether. And let’s not confuse conflict-avoidance for peace. Some people avoid confronting issues with their spouses, or their kids, or coworkers and they think that’s peacemaking. Nope. That’s just peace-loving. That’s just conflict avoidance. And ultimately that’s just piling up your troubles for later! The peace that Jesus talked about and pointed to does not come from evading issues, it comes from facing them and conquering them—even when it’s hard, even when it’s a struggle.

For you and me to seek to be peacemakers means we’re open to those times when God impresses upon us to do something. To work toward reconciliation. In all of your private little battles; the little skirmishes and wars that are going on in your relational world. The battles some of you are having with your spouse, even

this Sunday morning. The battles some of you are having with relatives, or children, or parents. The battles some of you are having with co-workers and bosses and employees, former employees. The battles some of you are having with other church members, or former church members. Scripture gives this command, **“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).**

What does that look like? It means that you move toward people to make peace when there is a conflict. That coworker that you're mad at because of something he or she said, you move toward them to bring peace. It means those family members who grate on your nerves, who know just how to push your buttons, you don't feed that fire, you decide to be a peacemaker. Those situations where you can get drawn into gossip and tear someone down, you deliberately choose not to, because you follow the Prince of Peace, and you will be a peacemaker yourself.

When I die, I hope one thing that will be said of me is, “He was peacemaker.” Others will shake their heads and say, “Yeah but he was trouble-maker too!” But I want to be a peacemaker. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone.

Now I have to confuse all this a bit. Because Jesus also said this, **“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division” (Luke 12:51).** He goes on to talk about how, because of him, families will divide, father against son, daughter against mother. That doesn't sound like peace! Is Jesus contradicting his own message? No. Remember, that the peace he came to bring is an inner peace that is there even in the presence of conflict. Jesus is simply telling people who follow him that not everybody will choose to follow him. That even within a family, as some become followers of Jesus and others don't, that may cause division.

And I've seen it happen. When a young man chooses to give his life fully to Jesus and that leads him to choose an educational path, or a career path, that his parents don't think he should pursue, because they're not followers of Jesus. That causes division. When a young woman leaves the family business, because she's striving to follow Jesus and live a life of honesty and integrity, but the family business, she begins to see, is built on lies and deception. That causes division. When parents are followers of Jesus and a son is living a selfish, self-destructive life in rebellion to Jesus, those parents accept their son, but not his choices, and they choose not to support him in his habits, that can cause division. So yes, Jesus came offering peace, showing a way of peace, but following him could also cause division.

This would also probably be a good place to point out that there are also times when God will strategically disturb your peace in order to help you or me make a course correction. Jesus will disturb your peace if you are about to fudge on your taxes. He will disturb your peace if you're about to have sex outside of marriage. He will disturb your peace if you are failing to be mindful of the poor, the broken-hearted, the down-trodden. He will disturb your peace if you fail to practice generosity.

The Prince of Peace has the right to disturb all of that in order to get your attention, not to harm you or punish you, but to help you make a course correction, to help you and me see what we need to to live the life that really is life.

Then because of what God has already done, we can have peace with ourselves. **“The Bible's take on peace...being at peace with ourselves”.** Jesus said in John 14, **“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” (John 14:27, NIV).** Peace within ourselves drives out fear and inner discord.

The problem is that there are enemies to our peace. I asked what those might be on Facebook. And you gave me some pretty funny replies. Enemies of peace: “Customer service people in India, all named BOB!!!!” “Two and Four year olds with ‘talking’ toys.” “The elusive chirping cricket in the house, traffic jams, and the voices of Justin Bieber and know-it-all political talk show hosts.” “School—Bad grades to be exact.” “Those who have more than 20 items in the express checkout at the store.” All these are enemies of peace.

You also gave me some serious ones: “Disunity with those I do life with, Jesus stirring something in me, or confrontation with my own sin.” “Fear.” “Greed... Any time I want, and can’t have something, I have little or no peace.” “Chaos and lack of control of any given situation.” “Bills.” “Life.”

The enemies of peace are there and they are real. We can name them pretty quickly. Stress. Pressure. Relational conflict. Information overload. Noise—we are surrounded by noise everywhere all the time. We do it to ourselves and it becomes an enemy of peace. Oh, and then there’s me! I can be an enemy of my peace because of things I do, or don’t do, the way I handle situations or try to avoid them.

What happens when these enemies of peace come into our life? They put us in this constant reactive state. We worry, we try to control situations and people, we consume more and more thinking that will bring peace, or we just avoid it all, stuff it down until it all explodes later. And that’s fun! That’s peaceful!

How do we make this peace personal, internal? Here’s some good advice from the Apostle Paul. **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7, NIV).**

You want peace, what does this tell you? Turn worry into prayer. Instead of sitting around worrying about something, put that same energy into talking to, and listening to the God who made you. And what can you take to God in prayer? It says it right there: everything! Sometimes people tell me, “I can pray for other people but I just can’t pray for myself.” My response is, “You better start praying for yourself!” You need it! I need it! Pray for yourself, for others, take everything to God. That’s how we experience lasting inner peace.

That passage tells us that peace is linked to thanksgiving. This is just a fact. If you’re down, and depressed, in turmoil, force yourself to see what is good in your life, because it’s there! See the blessings and give thanks in the midst of the tough stuff, in the midst of the lean times, focus on what you do have, not on what you don’t!

This is telling us that through prayer, through our ongoing connecting to God, to Jesus, we experience a peace that goes beyond our understanding. That doesn’t mean that it’s a big mystery, it means that it’s not of our own doing. It’s a peace that comes to us from God, not our own skill, or by our own efforts.

And listen, this peace isn’t something you just drift into by accident. You find this peace by intentionally seeking it. You find this peace by intentionally unplugging from the noise and busyness regularly to read and pray. You find this peace by being still, quiet, and listening. It’s counter-cultural, but it is the way to peace.

Listen to this one last verse as if Jesus is saying these words to you, **“Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion. Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me--watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30, The Message).** That’s what I want. I want to learn that from him. I want to accept that from him. It’s available to me and to you and that is peace. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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