

Names for the Messiah: Prince of Peace
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Scripture: John 20: 19-23

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.
On this platform of peace, we can create a language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.
At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace.

We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
Peace.

We look at each other, then into ourselves,
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:
Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul.

These words were written by the great American poet Maya Angelou. They are a portion of her poem debuted at the annual White House Christmas celebration in 2005. Her poem titled, *Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem* is really a prayer, giving words for her longing for peace. We all long for peace. Whether it's between nations and people around the world or peace among our family and friends; it's a common desire and hope in this season.

During this month of December we have celebrated the season of Advent, a season of longing and waiting. If Advent is for the longing, then Christmas is for the joy. And yet, this morning as we gather, we are so close to Christmas, but not quite there. We have to wait for a few more hours, but it is coming. With the birth of Jesus we remember every year that the angels announced the good news of great joy for all people, that the Messiah is born. The words echoed throughout church buildings and our culture alike join the refrain praising God saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace."

Today we celebrate the coming of the one who was to be the Prince of Peace. During this season of Advent we have looked closely at the words of the prophet Isaiah, that the Messiah would be "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace." This morning, I ask you, "Is Jesus your Prince of Peace? Is Jesus the Prince of Peace for the world?"

It's hard to find peace in the midst of the unrest of the world. I mean, when I look at the world the first word that doesn't come to mind is peace. I don't have to point out all the realities of violence or the threat of violence that exists today to convince you of this. That's why we should wait in the last few hours of Advent a little longer. This season calls us to wait, yes, but to long for the coming of God to make things right. And in that waiting, we can begin to realize that we are in fact moving closer and closer to the joy that's not quite there as we languish with our dissatisfaction with the world as it is or the suffering within the world and within each of us. We long to see God step in and make things right. We even wrestle with our own lack of peace within our daily lives and interactions, even so, we long for "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

The desire of God for our world is one of *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace. Shalom is more than just an absence of hostility or conflict, but the desire for wholeness or completeness for all people. This hope for shalom was first entrusted to God's people, yet violence and greed covered the earth. God set up kings for maintenance of shalom. Even the great King Solomon, whose name literally means "king of peace," ignored the welfare or shalom of all people. God desired shalom for everyone, yet the way of empire could never be trusted. In the empire there is no forgiveness, no generosity, no humility, no denial of self for the sake of neighbor, and certainly no real or lasting peace for all. Hostility, aggression, conflict, and violence ruled the day. Something had to change.

There was a time when all the angels were gathered about the heavenly throne for a discussion. Things were in a mess down on earth. The Creator had become concerned about the state of the Creation - wars, fighting, famine, bloodshed all over. "I've tried everything," God complained. "I have spoken to them some of the most beautiful words they could ever hope to hear. Think of the glorious Psalms, the hymns, the poetic passages of Isaiah. They love to read about peace and goodwill, but they don't like to live it!"

God continued, "Then I sent them the prophets. They love Isaiah, the promises of release from their sufferings, freedom from their exile. But do they follow the precepts of the prophets about justice and righteousness rolling down like waters? Never!" There was widespread discussion of the sad state of affairs on earth. Many of the angels - Gabriel, Michael, and others had been on earth on many occasions. They had seen for themselves the sources of God's lament and shared God's concern.

"I think the only thing left is for one of you, a member of the heavenly court, to go down to earth. Live with them, not just for a moment, but every day. Get to know them, become one of them, live with them, let them get to know you. Only then will heaven's intent be truly communicated to them. Only then will they take notice of the great gap between the way they have been living and the way they were created. Only then will we be able to reveal to them who I created them to be."

The angels stood in awkward silence. They had been to earth before, to deliver messages from God or to affect some momentary intervention in human affairs. They weren't about to volunteer for long term duty in such a murderous, difficult place. The silence lasted for an eternity. Finally, God broke the silence. Quietly, with determination, but without resignation and no bitterness, God said, "Then I will go."

God has shown us the way of peace. In the little child, whose birth we celebrate tonight and tomorrow, God has shown us the way of peace. It's not about greed, security, or violence, those are of the values of empire, instead the way of peace is about forgiveness, generosity, and love, the values of God's Kingdom that Jesus brought to earth. The way of Jesus sounds frightening in the world we live in, yet they are the things that make for peace.

In the very last chapter of John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples after his torture, execution, and death, and offers them a simple blessing of peace. "You are terrified, not just by my death, of the unknown, and what could come to you, but you are terrified that I have left you," yet Jesus speaks, "Peace be with you." The wounds of his suffering are seen and again Jesus speaks, "Peace be with you." Finally, they are sent. The disciples are sent with the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive, to give, and to love. As they are sent, "Peace be with you."

It's a common theme throughout the Scriptures and even in Jesus' life. To go against the values of empire is beyond frightening, it's deadly. Perhaps that's why Jesus' words are often filled with peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives," Jesus said in John 14. "When you enter a house," Jesus told the disciples in Luke, "first say, 'Peace to this house.'" That is the blessing we bring with us, a real desire and hope for peace, for shalom, for well-being and wholeness for the other person. Mother Teresa once wrote, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to the other person." We are all connected to one another. Peace begins with our personal interaction with others. Jesus made it a personal blessing; house to house and person to person.

In the Jewish tradition to offer shalom is to offer a blessing to the other person, indicating that you have a desire for wholeness or well-being for them. We have that tradition too, don't we? Every Sunday morning we're invited to pass the peace of Jesus to those around you. Is that simply another greeting or is there something more to this ritual? To pass the peace is to give a blessing of shalom to those around you in this community of faith. I know we already offered the peace this morning, but I invite you to turn to those around you and simply say, "**Shalom.**" You have given each other a blessing of peace. Receive this gift, and take it to the world. As followers of the Prince of Peace, it is our joyous and sometimes frightening responsibility to care for one another, to offer a blessing of shalom to everyone. We do so, because the values of the kingdom of God remind us that we are all brothers and sisters.

On Christmas Eve in 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached his famous words, "We must either learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we are all going to perish together as fools," and he continued by saying, "All of life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny." Peace, shalom, comes when we awaken to the reality that we are all connected, we are all one family. Peace is what we can offer to each other. Maya Angelou echoed this sentiment in her poetic words, "We look

at each other, then into ourselves, and we say without shyness or apology or hesitation: Peace, My Brother. Peace, My Sister. Peace, My Soul." If we desire shalom, if we're waiting for shalom, may we realize this Christmas that it begins with each of us following the tiny babe of Bethlehem into life, death, and resurrection all our days, and when we follow, we begin to see that we are brothers and sisters in this journey of life.

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth....I invite you to sing this hymn and as we do, may it be our Christmas Eve prayer...

Let There Be Peace On Earth

PRAYER

O come, O come, Emmanuel, our Prince of Peace, we pray "let there be peace on earth." Help us to learn today that it begins with each of us following your values of forgiveness, generosity, and love. We have been waiting for you in the darkness and fear of this season, yet you have given us the blessing of peace to give to everyone.

As we wait for peace in the world, be with us.

As we pray for peace for families, be with us.

As we pray for peace in our streets, send us forth.

As we pray for kindness and community, make us instruments of your peace.

Be our hope this day and forevermore in the name of our Prince of Peace we pray, Jesus the Christ. Amen.