Sermon – Christmas Eve

Luke 2: 1-20

On Christmas Eve in 1967, the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr delivered his Christmas sermon, which began with these words:

“The Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian.”

His message was delivered at the height of the civil rights era and in the midst of the conflict in Vietnam. This country was heavily divided and peace must have seemed an ideal out of reach to many. It seems not a lot has changed in the intervening years.

We are reminded everyday that peace between people has been hard to come by. War and terrorism still impact our nation and the world. The political climate in this country has devolved into partisan squabbles and there is now a war on truth. We have a president that sees his role as anything but unifying a fractured country. Authoritarian leaders are on the rise throughout the world and relations between various groups in society are frayed. If you only lived enmeshed in these issues, hope for a better world might seem a long way off.

The only antidote to a world full of tumult is a return to the hope that was manifested in a small part of the world when a baby was born some 2,000 years ago. That baby Jesus would change the world by showing us the true human face of a loving creator God. The baby Jesus would grow to demonstrate to us what life should be like for humankind and left us with a promise that we too could change the world for the better.

Dr King was one such person whose prophetic ministry took the message of Jesus and made it real for many people. He gave hope to so many that helped them to say no-more and enabled them to rise above oppression.

Isaiah was another prophetic person from an earlier time who similarly changed the world for the better. In his time war between nations and kingdoms ravaged the land, injustice pervaded humanity as one group of people exploited another and many people were oppressed. Kings came and went but very few delivered peace and prosperity for their kingdoms. For the majority, hope existed only in the proclaimed savior, the messiah. The messiah’s birth, from David’s line, one of the few benevolent and faithful kings, had been long promised.

The messianic dawn was heralded in Isaiah’s prophecy. No longer would the oppressed people live in the darkness of despair. A light was coming to shine on them. The light was the light of freedom and peace that would come in the form of a new king, a king like they had not known before.
Isaiah proclaimed that a child was to be born on whom all authority rested and who was to be named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” His authority was to grow continually, and there was to be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

The feast of Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus the Christ, the very same child that Isaiah named as Emmanuel (God is with us), and who was born of Mary and Joseph in a dark and dank manger in Bethlehem. God desired a closer relationship with us and so came amongst us as a baby, like us, a fellow human being. He carried with him the promise and hope of a nation that he had come into the world to fulfill the promise of God.

Together we share in this very human moment, the act of being born of a woman, carrying the hope of others as we emerge into the world and take our first breath. It is an act that binds us together as humans because no matter to whom we are born, we have been born just as Jesus was born; naked, crying, and needing immediate nurturing.

The announcement of the birth of a baby is generally a joyous occasion and cause for celebration within the family. But how many of us have experienced an angel standing before us declaring the birth of someone’s child? This is what makes the birth of Jesus just that little bit different from each of us.

Imagine being those shepherds? Out on a hillside, tending their sheep, sitting around a campfire to stay warm and minding their own business. Out of the darkness of their hillside camp angels come forth. A multitude of angels we are told and they begin praising God and saying “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those that he favors!”

The shepherds answered the call and made their way down to Bethlehem and to the manger to see Jesus. They told Mary about their miraculous encounter with the angels of God. She knew they were right and so she treasured their words and pondered them in her heart. Mary already knew she was carrying a special child but these words brought by the lowly shepherds seemed to resonate with her and bring her a deeper sense of peace that the prophecy given to her by the angel Gabriel had been fulfilled.

The peace that was promised in Isaiah’s prophecy and in the proclamation of the angels was not an indiscriminate peace, rather a peace that flows to those who are accepting of his birth as the messiah, the prince of peace. For it is in accepting Jesus that we come into his kingdom and, like Jesus’ authority, we grow continually, and this brings us peace.

The true peace that comes from Jesus expresses the nature of salvation as the restoration of good relations between God and us, and the consequent reception of God’s blessings. When we make the decision to accept Jesus and turn back to God, to amend our lives to more reflect how Jesus taught us to live, then we open ourselves to his powerful healing and the blessing of deep inner peace.

Peace can at times feel very elusive. Even as faithful believers the many setbacks and difficulties of our human lives can upset us and destabilize us to the point where peace seems
far off. How do we find peace when our family members are at odds with each other? How do we find peace when our newborn might have died or become very ill? How do we find peace when our child has been incarcerated or our family is traumatized by mental illness or gun violence?

Well, it is through belief that Jesus, as the incarnation of God, will bring comfort and peace to our hearts and hope to our lives so that we are able to face these difficulties together. We are not immune from life’s troubles however our faith can strengthen us to endure through them.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph and all of Jesus’ friends were not immune from pain and suffering but they carried the hope that was born with Jesus that his birth heralded a new time, a time that would lead us to a new beginning and a new sense of being at peace in a world that was, and will always be, full of challenges.

The light that came into the world through the birth of Jesus is also the light that shines in the world today for us. We both receive the light of Christ at baptism and then we each radiate that light as God’s love for the world. Peace and restoration of God’s intended relationship with us will only come when we surrender to the little child who embodied it all.

We then become the teachers for the world and the custodians of Christ’s peace. The world looks at us and wonders why we are different. Maybe someone has recognized that peaceful quality in you. We can tell them that a baby changed our lives.

Our world today seems just as tribal and conflicted as it ever has been. One group of people seems to want to disparage others as they set about bending the world to their sense of rightness. Another group wants to bully the one who is different and deny them justice and love. All this happens because we can’t seem to accept that we are indeed interdependent and interrelated as God’s creation. As the apostle Paul says to the Romans, “there is no distinction between Jew or Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.”

Dr King said in his Christmas sermon “if there is to be peace on earth and good will towards all, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations.” Our moral foundations come from knowing Jesus’ life.

It is our gift to the world to live our lives grounded in the moral foundation established by Jesus Christ. As God gifted us God’s-self in the form of the baby Jesus, we gift to the world the light of Christ, the love of Christ and the hope for a peaceful heart as we tend the vineyard that is our lives and the lives of our family and community.

On this Feast of Christmas as we remember the birth of this baby that came into the world and changed it forever, may you find peace in your hearts and hope for a better world.

I wish each and every one of you a blessed Christmas and a new year filled with a deepening sense of the presence of God in your lives.

Amen

Rev. Andrew Durbidge
St Luke St Matthew, Brooklyn
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