

Advent 2012: Shalom Makers

Isaiah 9:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:13b-18;23

Dec 9,2012

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[Pray]

On November 11, 1918 the sun rose on the delivered city of Mons [in central Belgium]. All night long the darkness had been shot through with the lurid flashes of gunfire...[as Canadian forces clashed with the final German stronghold of the Great War].

But at dawn the last German outpost withdrew, and from the barred and shuttered homes of [Mons] the people streamed. Down the street sped the cry, "Hang out your flags." When the sun rose, it shone on a city of banners, and on the delirious joy [of those who had lived in a land of darkness for four years, and who] now walked free [in a land of peace].¹

It is often said that you don't miss something until it is gone. And that is certainly a reality when it comes to "peace". In comparison to places like the Middle East and much of the continent of Africa in Canada today things have been peaceful so long that I dare suggest most of us – me included, take this nearly global hunger for peace for granted. We are truly among a minority of people who enjoy today what many can only dream of for tomorrow.

This morning we are looking at a familiar text from the Prophet Isaiah. Please turn with me to Isaiah chapter 9, and would you stand for the reading of God's word.

[Isaiah 9:1-7]

May the Lord bless the reading of His Word. You may be seated.

Advent:

Today is the second week of Advent, which if you missed last week means "arrival" or "coming". And in this season Christians remember that the power for today comes from what Jesus has done for us in the past as well as from what He has promised to do in the future.

¹ Story taken from "The Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Isaiah" (Nashville: Pierce and Washabaugh Press), 1956. pg 231. Interspersed with details taken from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mons>

But while a large part of our faith is split between looking back in remembrance and forward in expectation, Christians are called to live in the present. Last Sunday we examined Isaiah 64 and the Hope that God would once again tare the Heavens apart and come down to transform and vindicate His people.

In remembrance this prophesied vindication became a reality 2000 years ago when Jesus, through His life and death, freed us from the bondage of sin, and in expectation it will come to ultimate completion when Christ returns. Of course it is no secret that between those two events lie thousands of years.

Yet, despite the fact that we find ourselves between these two great events we can still live in genuine and realistic hope that because of what He has done and because of what He will do, God can still come down to transform and vindicate our lives today. Amen?

...

This week we build off of the hope we have established as we focus in on the Peace God promised to bring into reality, the Peace Jesus inaugurated 2000 years ago and the ultimate peace He promises for the future. And again what we see in the past and expect for the future causes us to live a certain way today.

Before we get to how this changes us today let's look back in remembrance and forward in expectation.

Look with me at verse one

[Read Isaiah 9:1]

To set the context for you, Isaiah writes these words close to six hundred years before Christ when things were looking very grim for the Israelites. Israel had long forsaken the ways of YHWH and prostituted themselves to the gods of the surrounding countries. Spiritually the nation had slipped into a sharp tailspin that was doomed from the beginning. And so the glory years of King David were but a distant memory in their minds. And yet the faithful people continued to hope that every new king that arose might be God's promised Messiah, the one who would return the nation to its former glory, prosperity and obedience.

And in the people's mind that longing was more desperate now then ever. As Isaiah wrote, the brutal Assyrians had already captured the northern kingdom and only the Tribe of Judah remained free though it too was not far from being decimated by Babylon.

Specifically in this verse Isaiah mentions the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali which made up the district of Galilee. This was a decimated area, but Isaiah prophecies that there was a time of glorious peace coming when the humility of today would be forgotten. Of course Galilee was also where Jesus would grow up and carry out most of His ministry.

But hundreds of years earlier in Isaiah's day the people were hungry for this peace, just like the people of Mons were in the four years leading up to their liberation at the hands of the Canadian Forces. It doesn't take long before the ravages of war leave a people longing for the leaven of peace.

And through Isaiah God promises that this long awaited peace was coming. Look at verses two and three.

[Read Isaiah 9:2-3]

When people are walking in darkness, decreasing in number and wallowing in the gloom of defeat the thought of a great light to pierce the darkness, the promise of multiplication, gladness and rejoicing, sounds about as good as a feast does to a starving man.

Can you see how desperate the people were for peace? How much they longed for God's liberation?

Today, while we in Canada certainly are not suffering under the pains of war, we too are in desperate need of God's liberation. Consider these statistics.

Whether you agree with the findings or not, this week CBC radio reported that Prince George was voted Canada's most dangerous city for the third year in a row.² Crime is a real problem.

Or consider poverty. At the national level, while most people in Canada experience one of the highest living standards in the world 10% of Canadians or 3.5 million people live in poverty.

Every month 770 thousand of those people use food banks across Canada, forty percent are children.³

Or finally consider the world of human trafficking which is estimated to be between a \$120 and \$400 million dollar per year industry in Canada. This amounts to between 8 and 16 thousand young women or girls entering Canada each year, most of whom come from poor countries in Asia.⁴

On the surface things can look really good, but the reality is that Canada is in need of God's liberation today. And so we too look forward like Israel did to when God will right the wrongs and bring justice to the oppressed.

² <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/12/06/bc-most-dangerous-city-prince-george.html>

³ This stat and the one above come from <http://www.makepovertyhistory.ca/learn/issues/end-poverty-in-canada>

⁴ <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/canada.htm>

In verses four and five Isaiah prophesies what will happen as God brings this to pass.

[Read Isaiah 9:4-5]

God promises deliverance from slavery as in the days of Midian- which if you remember was when Gideon and a few faithful warriors threw off their oppressors. God's deliverance will be so complete that Israel's military clothing will have no other function than to be burnt for heat.

This would have sounded incredibly good to war torn Israel, but this was nothing compared to what was promised in verses 6 and 7.

[Read Isaiah 9:6-7]

When it comes to Old Testament Scriptures that prophecy Jesus this is one of the most powerful. Two chapters earlier Isaiah told people

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Being born of a virgin is remarkable, but in that verse it is the name given to this Son – Emanuel which means “God among us” that is most powerful.

And in today's text the prophecy is expanded considerably. Of first note is the fact that this son will reign on David's throne and the weight of governmental leadership will be on His shoulders. Every Jew would have recognized this language immediately – Isaiah was prophesying the long awaited, divinely anointed King – the Messiah.

In the hundreds of years of decline since King David held the throne in Israel the people had longed for another King like David to arise. A man who would be divinely sanctioned to draw Israel back to their God and rid them of their enemies.

And every time a new King took the throne this desire was re-affirmed: “Could this be the one? Could this be God's Messiah King?”

And in these words finally God said “Yes, your Messiah is coming, but He is going to be way more than you ever wished for. In fact, what you are wishing for is nothing in comparison to what I'm going to give you.”

You wanted a King who would build his kingdom by overthrowing your enemies in battle, I'll give you a Messiah, verse 7 says, who will build His kingdom by promoting justice and righteousness.

Now this wouldn't have made much sense to Israel – really from a human perspective this isn't how kingdoms conquer other kingdoms. And so the people would have asked “who is this promised King? What's His name?”

And God gives four compound names: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” And each of these could easily become a sermon. But today we are only going to look at the last - Your King will be called “Prince of Peace.”

Now this name or title, like the three others we aren't looking at, is made up of two ideas tied together.

The first word “Prince” or “Crown Prince” means upcoming ruler with sovereign authority. God's Messiah will be Prince and then He will be King.

And the second word is the Hebrew word “Shalom” translated poorly by the English word Peace. In English “peace” either refers to an inner calm or is what happens after war finishes, and so in that way is little more than a word describing something that isn't there – no war.

But in Hebrew “Shalom” is an action like benevolence. It describes the work of bringing about a condition of rich, interrelated well-being for a community of people where everything is made right.

In Hebrew you never have “Shalom” by yourself. You always share it with somebody or provide it for someone else.

And so God's Messiah the Prince of Peace would be the divinely sanctioned ruler who would bring about a rich state of right-relatedness between people and between people and God. Shalom would reign in His Kingdom.

This is the prophecy of old that was promised to Israel. And oh how they longed for this result – to live in a kingdom ruled by the Prince of Shalom. But they still couldn't have imagined how God was going to bring this about.

Of course we know that 2000 years ago the birth of Jesus signified the rise of this Kingdom. A Kingdom of peace that, like verse seven says, would be established and upheld by justice and righteousness and would increase from that time on and forever.

And oh how we today long for the King of Peace to return to rule the earth with the same justice and righteousness promised here. How we long for the new Heaven and new earth John saw in Revelations when God will live with people and “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.

And so that is both the look back to the prophesied Prince of Peace and the look forward in expectation to His second coming. But what does it mean to live in the reality of Peace today?

To go here we need to look at two passages in the New Testament. One from the lips of Jesus, and another from Paul where he unpacks what it means to follow the living Prince of Peace.

First look with me at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter five, and verse nine where Jesus says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)

Now this section of Scripture, called the Beatitudes, are Jesus' description of what it means to be a Christian, what it looks like to follow Him today. And there is no surprise here, since Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the chief creator of rich, harmonious, positive well-being in the world we too are called to be peace makers.

And Jesus says those who image the Prince of Peace by living out His nature as peace makers will be called children of God. As such Jesus shares both His name and His task with His children.

The way Jesus does Peace shapes the way we do it.

But how can little people like us bring peace in our crime infested, poverty ridden, corruption driven world? By ourselves we aren't powerful enough to enforce it! Isn't that the UN's job, or at least our political leader's task?

Commentator Dale Brunner notes at this point that this feeling of helplessness in the face of the world's problems was very much a first century feeling as well. And yet Jesus tells His followers that they are responsible to make peace in the world they live in.

And this was a counter-cultural statement. In the first century "it was the Roman Emperor who was called the "Peacemaker" and so "Son of God"; but Jesus' blessing counter culturally "democratizes" or downsizes these exalted imperial titles and awards them to all the little people of the world who make peace in their minuscule "empires."⁵

⁵ Brunner, Dale "The Christbook: Matthew 1-12" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub Co), 2004. Pg 177.

Jesus doesn't need you to change the world; He is most interested in what happens in the little worlds we live in. We are to make peace, to bring blessing and to promote harmony in our communities. And at this point, if you were with us last fall you should be thinking "Missional church" – Each of us going out as missionaries bringing Christ's shalom into our own neighbourhoods.

But what does this look like? For this I want to turn to Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians where he says

Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus....

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. (1 Thessalonians 5:13b-18;23a)

Paul here is exhorting the church of Thessalonica to live "in peace" with one another and he gives eight examples of what this looks like. Some are not exactly what we might expect a peace maker to do, but all are active attempts to bring peace to your community and fit with the word "Shalom" we have looked at.

The first thing Paul mentions in verse 14 is to warn those who are idle. To make peace in our community means that when we see people not contributing we need to warn them. These people are not actively making peace and therefore are not imaging Jesus and so are not proving that they are children of God.

That is quite a warning and could come across quite offensive, especially if you had to say it to someone who had been in the church a long time. Aren't peacemakers supposed to avoid controversy? Actually that isn't what Paul calls for here. Most often today when we see people not being constructive within the church our "loving response" is to ignore them or not let their behavior get to us.

But we are called to make peace, not avoid conflict. And to make peace, to build an environment of well-being in our midst means that those who are not directly working towards this need to be challenged and warned.

Ask yourself "are you someone who is actively promoting well-being and prosperity here in our community or are you just not causing trouble? As Christ's followers we are called to proactively build shalom.

Next in verse 14 Paul says “encourage the timid.” The word “timid” here does not mean people with a shy personality, rather this word could more accurately be translated “discouraged or downcast”. Look for these people and encourage them. Are there people in our church who fit this category? Are you sitting beside someone who fits this category? Again the scriptures call for us to proactively seek these people out and be an encouragement to them. That is what a Shalom maker does.

Third Paul tells us that to live in peace with each other we need to be helping the weak among us. What gifts have you been given that someone else in the community could benefit from? Where could you be a blessing? How could your presence build up a weakness in someone else? The disciple Jesus loved tells us:

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? (1 John 3:17)

Fourth, we are called to patience... How easy it is to grow short with people we worship along side when they like different things than we do. But again the patience called for here is not just a tolerance towards each other such that we clench our teeth and endure one another. Instead it is a genuine desire to live with those around us in spite of the differences between us.

One way I have seen this lived out in a previous church was as the different age groups decided that instead of holding to what they preferred as far as music was concerned – instead of feeling like the other age groups were stealing more and more from them – they adopted a stance of mutual service where each age group intentionally decided to serve the other by pushing for songs the other group preferred.

The result was an incredible blended music set and a rich spirit of mutually serving patience as they dealt with one of the most difficult issues any church faces.

Fifth, in verse 15 Paul rewords Jesus’ Golden Rule: Do onto others as you would have them do onto you.” Like with patience when kindness rules a community shalom is present.

Then in verse 16 Paul says “Be joyful always” not happy, but full of joy. Happiness is brought about when external things go well. Joy has an inward source, in this case the Prince of Shalom living within us. Let this inward power inspire a continual attitude of joy within yourself and let that joy pour out of you.

Seventh, pray continually or without ceasing. Keep God on your mind regardless of what you are doing or who you are with. When God is on your mind it is hard not to bring peace to those around you.

And finally give thanks in all circumstances. This is the absolute opposite of being a complainer. And the reason we can do this in spite of our circumstances is that in His Kingdom of Shalom God works all things together for good for those who love Him. That is the reality; the act of faith is to therefore choose to be thankful regardless of what is put before you. This isn't easy, it takes the miracle of the indwelling God to make this possible, but it is so much easier to bring peace to your community with a thankful heart than a complaining heart.

A few verses down Paul brings his letter to a conclusion and we will conclude with this as well – with the words of verse 23:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through
and through. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

On November 11th, 1918 the Canadian Forces were peacemakers for the city of Mons. They endured conflict some dying for their goal, but in the end they brought a rich sense of shalom to the city of Mons.

In the same way empowered by the fact that the Prince of Peace came two-thousand years ago and that He promises to return one day we are called today, not to be just peaceful quiet people, not to always avoid controversy, but instead to allow the Prince of Peace to move through us such that we take on His mission and become shalom makers in our community.