

## Christ, Our Peace

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

December 6, 2020

Ephesians 2:14-21

This is second Sunday of Advent. Our theme is peace. Appropriately, peace is the theme of the Advent booklet that came out this week. I have enjoyed and been inspired by the pieces many of you have written. I especially appreciated Rufus Spain's reflection, in part because I recall him from my graduate school days at Baylor, during the Viet Nam era, when he was sometimes a lone sentinel for peace.

In particular Jeanette Marsh's contribution caught my attention. She and I started our wondering at the same place. "This morning I was wondering," she wrote, "why Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. His life -- and the entire period of history in which he lived -- was punctuated by oppression, conflict, and violence." She wondered further, "What did Isaiah have in mind when he prophesied the messiah would be called 'the Prince of Peace'?"

Jeanette was referring to the classic passage in Isaiah that will be read on Christmas Day:

*. . . all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace.*

\*\*\*\*\*

But as Jeanette noted, Jesus did not know peace in his own life and time. He was embroiled in controversy and conflict throughout his brief ministry.

He was continually involved in debates with religious leaders, debates that often became acrimonious and sometimes devolved into name calling. Once, when his opponent ran out of arguments, he blurted out, "Oh yeah, well, you're a Samaritan. And not only that, you have a demon." (John 8:48) Jesus was no slouch at rough repartee. He once compared his critics to "*whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.*" (Matthew 23:27)

Jesus was divisive. And he knew he was divisive. "*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*" That sword would divide families: "*a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*" To be his follower, you had to be prepared to make those sacrifices. "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever*

*loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:34-39)*

Jesus did not live the tranquil life of a Francis of Assisi-like monk who walked the Judean countryside talking to birds.

According to the Gospel of Mark, there were plots against his life from the beginning of his ministry. And lest we forget the obvious, he was the innocent victim of a religion-inspired, state-sponsored execution.

When he died a premature death, Judea was still governed by Rome, and his followers were huddled in an upper room somewhere in Jerusalem, terrified that the authorities would come after them next.

Yet the author of our text exclaimed, “He is our peace.” The question is: What happened in the 35-40 years that separated the death of Jesus and the penning of those words? What happened that caused the writer to proclaim Jesus as “our peace”?

\*\*\*\*\*

We need to remind ourselves that the ministry of Jesus and the small movement that formed around him took place within first century Judaism. The critical, fundamental question that faced the followers of Jesus after his death was whether this new movement was a party within Judaism, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, or something completely new and separate. We know the answer, but they didn’t know. And getting to the answer was difficult, painful and filled with conflict.

The story of the church’s struggle to arrive at a clear definition of itself is told in a series of carefully chosen stories in the book of Acts.

At Pentecost 3,000 people were converted to the new movement – but they were all Jews. Hellenistic Jews from around the Mediterranean for the most part, slightly different from Palestinian Jews, but still Jews. They were in Jerusalem to participate in a Jewish festival.

Shortly thereafter, the followers of Jesus – they weren’t called Christians yet – were expelled from Jerusalem. They scattered throughout the region, taking their new Gospel with them. One of them, Philip, went to Samaria and started preaching. No one told him he couldn’t. And some Samaritans – who shared a history and a religious tradition with Jews, but there was deep animosity between the two nonetheless – were converted. Then Philip traveled south where he met an Ethiopian who was coming back from a religious festival in Jerusalem. Was he a convert to Judaism? Or a God-fearer, someone who curious about Judaism? He also was converted, and he was baptized by the side of the road.

Why did the historian tell stories about Philip, who otherwise is virtually unknown in scripture? There were many other stories the writer could have told. Why those? Because single-handedly Philip was pushing the envelope, forcing the church to deal with the question of how inclusive it was going to be.

Then the climax – the conversion of a Roman soldier, a card-carrying Gentile, like you and me.

Do you see the progression? Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, possibly a proselyte from Ethiopia, a Roman soldier. This was not a well-planned evangelistic campaign. This was improvisational evangelism. Theology was being driven by events on the ground.

A conference was held in Jerusalem. All the big names were there – Peter, Paul, James. The question boiled down to something we would consider an ecclesiastical

obscurity – circumcision. The underlying issue was whether these newly converted Gentiles had to become Jews in order to become Christians, which is what would have been involved if the new Jesus movement were a sort of reformed wing of Judaism. The church answered, no, everyone gets in the same way, Jews and Gentiles alike – through faith in Jesus. *“For through him both of us have access in one Spirit to God.”*

By the time the Epistle to the Ephesians was written, the church, which began as a tiny Jewish movement in Palestine, had expanded into Turkey (which is where Ephesus was located), Greece, Macedonia and Italy, and it was largely Gentile.

That is what happened in the 35-40 years between the death of Jesus and the writing of Ephesians.

\*\*\*\*\*

The peace that the author of Ephesians talked about was not world peace. It wasn't inner peace. Those are legitimate applications of the peace of Christ. But that is not what he was talking about. He was talking about the way the early church, following Jesus, had overcome religious barriers, ethnic barriers, national barriers in order to become a fellowship where *“there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.”*

Hear him again.

*“For he is our peace; he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . . so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.”*

What happened in the church in the four decades after the death of Jesus was simply living out his vision, extending the life and ministry of the one who made a Samaritan the hero of his best-known story, who praised the faith of a Gentile mother who dared to challenge him, who refused to recognize barriers that had been erected to separate God's children, who modeled a uniting, inclusive, embracing spirit that after his death restructured the religious world.

He is our peace, because he broke down the barriers that separated us, thereby creating a new humanity, one in which religion, geography, skin color, national identity, bank accounts, or zip codes, all of which define us as distinct from other people, are not allowed to obscure our common identity as children of God.

Tearing down cultural barriers, disregarding rankings that value and reward one group above another, affirming and defending the humanity of every person on the basis of the simple belief that they are members of the household of God – family – that is and always has been the task of the church.

Honesty requires us to admit that the church has not always been up to the task. Too often those who claimed to believe in Jesus have opposed this journey into a new, full humanity. Let's face it: some of our ancestors in the faith didn't believe African slaves had souls.

That is still our calling today. It is made difficult by societal forces that try to sort us into groups – by race or class or ideology. Our resistance to those forces is rooted in the biblical image of heaven as a vast banquet. At the table are people from every race, class, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, political persuasion, and musical taste.

When Wake Forest Baptist Church was in the throes of difficult discussions that led to a same-sex wedding, I reminded the congregation of the image of the heavenly banquet, and said, It isn't our business to make out the guest list. We just deliver the invitations. So it was, has been, is and always will be.