

## **Dec 1 – First Sunday in Advent**

Heavenly Peace

Isaiah 2: 1-4

The classic hymn, “Silent Night,” first made its debut on Christmas Eve, 1818 at the St. Nicholas chapel in the town of Oberndorf in Salzburg, Austria. The melody by composer Franz Gruber is instantly recognizable from the first few notes, and the original text by Joseph Mohr has been translated from the original German into over 140 languages. In 1914, just four years shy of the 100th anniversary of “Silent Night,” the soldiers fighting World War I along the Western Front held a ceasefire in some areas out of mutual respect for the holiday. Members from opposing sides exchanged gifts and stories with one another, played games, and sang Christmas carols together, including the beloved hymn “Silent Night.” Let us again hear about that time.

### **PLAY**

Today, churches all over the world gather together each year on Christmas Eve to light candles and sing “Silent Night.” We sing the words of the first verse, “Sleep in heavenly peace and yet, at this time, our communities, our churches, and our world are torn and divided about many issues. Families fight, politicians argue, social media spreads ignorance and hate on the Internet, and sometimes we feel that hope, peace, love, and light are missing from our lives. Today, as we begin our journey towards Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we ask ourselves the hard question, “What must I do to make the world a place of peace? What can I, as a follower of the Prince of Peace, do to make the blessing of the angels to the shepherds, “peace on earth” come alive in my little part of God’s creation?”

Perhaps this Christmas could be a time of ceasefire from our own sources of conflict. Where would you need to climb out of a foxhole to offer peace to another? Where would you need to let go, at least for a few moments, your negative or angry feelings so peace could reign? Where do you need to offer forgiveness or receive offered forgiveness? Perhaps this year, one of the goals we can set for ourselves is that when we raise our voices in song to celebrate the birth of Christ on December 24<sup>th</sup> we

will do it with new spirits of peace and love that transcends all barriers. Let's see how that might happen.

One of the things we need to do is to think in fresh ways about what Peace means for us and the world. Too often, when we hear the word "peace" we only think about the absence of war. This means if we are not screaming at someone or shooting at someone then we have peace. As important as this is, there is so much more to the idea of peace. It is these larger concepts that God is calling us to strive towards. God wants us to declare a lasting truce.

The word "truce," comes from the same root word for "faith, faithfulness, assurance of faith, covenant, truth, fidelity, and promise." Wow, when we truly advocate for a lasting truce, or "silence," in the conflicts in our lives we desire more than a brief respite in hostility. This was what occurred in 1914. After this lull the fighting resumed. We, as followers of the Prince of Peace, want a lasting truce in hostilities of all kind and we are committed to doing the hard and costly work to make that happen. We understand that a truce will happen only as we pursue justice, reaching across divides to build relationship and have compassion for those not like us. Wherever there is strife we have the human capacity to reach across divides and find our common humanity. We are challenged to not only pray for peace but to act as peacemakers in our lives. This idea was so poignantly expressed in the story of the WWI "Christmas truce" of 1914.

So, how can we live a message of Peace in a world torn by strife? If we think this longing for peace is a modern phenomenon we need to hear again the words we read from Isaiah. He laid out a prophetic vision of peace that would have been the text on the lips of the Jewish people of Jesus' time. How poignant would be the vision from Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

God's presence is associated with light throughout the scriptures. Isaiah's use of "walking in God's paths," or walking in the light, is a poetic use of metaphor to point to our commitment to conducting ourselves in a way that creates more justice, more compassion, more light in the world. We are reminded that wars are costly. That gaining the freedom we have and enjoy is costly. We must recall, as well, that being a follower

of the Prince of Peace is costly. To walk in the light is to not turn a blind eye to injustice. To walk in the light is to have compassion for all, not just those like us. To walk in the light is to live each day deliberately striving to make connections with those different from us for only through relationships will we find peace. It is saying that the more fully we walk in the light, the more we draw near to God. The closer we come to God the more we wish to walk in the light. And to do this we must forgive, forget, accept the differences of others and be willing to change.

There is a quote from Gareth Higgins from Northern Ireland, who has worked hard to bring peace to that country, that I find moving and compelling.

*“There are lots of ways to prevent violence, lots of ways to repair its consequences, lots of ways to build beloved community. In a polarized society there may be no more effective violence prevention measure than building bridges, or at least none more accessible. Get to know at least one person who votes differently. It’s not necessarily easy. But it is necessary. And the history of conflict transformation proves it works. Start with the person of different political views with whom you feel most comfortable. Just get to know each other. This is the work of peace.”* - Gareth Higgins

That would be a start, wouldn't it? Get to know someone who votes differently from you, not to argue politics but to see them as a beloved child of God. Think of other differences. Do you sit down and really listen to the young people in your life? Or do you just shake your head at how different, and maybe wrong, according to you, that they are in what they think and do? Do you find ways to engage with people of other races or faiths? Do you walk in the light when dealing with people who serve you in restaurants and shops? Peace is tough, it is building bridges.

Our exploration of the hymn “Silent Night” for this Advent/Christmas season is a way of “shining a light” on the power each of us has to reach out across divides and getting silent enough to listen to the “hopes and fears of all the years” of those we tend to cast as the enemy (or simply “different”) for one reason or another.

I hope this story about one person who issued the initial invitation to come out of the “mouseholes” and connect face to face, reminds us that we each have the ability to reach out across divides and connect. We are humans with common human needs and,

deep down, we all have the desire for peace for ourselves and our children. Making an effort for peace might just change the course of history, if only for a day. That is the power of love and peace that God gives us to use.