

“FINDING PEACE”

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:67-79

December 23, 2018

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If our Christmas songs are anything to go by, one of the things we all really want for Christmas is a little more peace. I guess maybe there's something about this season that awakens in us an awareness of the lack of it and a longing for it. It's not just in our Christmas hymns like "Silent Night" and "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear: and "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." From a brief Google search, I learned that Christmas songs on the theme of peace have been recorded by secular artists as diverse as Perry Como, Alabama, David Bowie, Melissa Etheridge, John Denver and the Muppets.

You might say it doesn't mean anything, it's just words in a song; but I think words always mean something, always reveal something, even if unintentionally.

You might say that it's just a holiday dream that has nothing to do with the real world... but that's an awfully cynical point of view for Christians to take, we who belong to the Prince of Peace.

You might say that the "peace on earth" of our songs and Christmas cards is overly simplistic and sentimental, with no understanding of true peace, that its implied refrain of "why can't we all just get along?" doesn't reckon with very real differences between people and very real issues between nations, that it glosses over injustices and hurts inflicted but not easily repaired. You'd certainly be right; but surely we ought to be capable of digging deeper in search of a more nuanced understanding.

You might say that it's easy to talk or sing about peace, but few of the people who talk about it are actually willing to do the hard work of peacemaking. There again, you'd probably be right... but all action starts with an unrealized need and a glimpse of a vision for change. Might not the Christmas dream of peace be the spark for somebody's movement toward healing a rift, reaching out across differences, or new commitment to non-violence?

You might hear this season's frequent refrains of "peace on earth" and be reminded, as I often am, of a latent longing for greater peace in our world and our lives. We want to stop hearing news of a mass shooting every week. We don't want to see people profiting from war. We want hate to be unacceptable again. We want to feel less angry. We want our families to be free from conflict. We want to go through our days without the constant companionship of anxiety.

And we really want these things at Christmas!

Maybe that desire is enough to motivate us to take some baby steps toward the peace we wish for.

Maybe this Advent you wrote a letter about human rights on international human rights day, or attended a vigil for victims of violence, or reached out to a neighbor whose race or faith is different from yours. Maybe you decided that next year you will join a peace organization or give more to the Peacemaking Offering or attend an anti-war rally. Maybe you are giving gifts that celebrate diversity or help people in other parts of the world, or perhaps you've intentionally avoided buying things that support war or promote violence. Maybe – most likely – some of these things will make a difference. Maybe some of them seem so insignificant as to be pointless, or little more than salve to conscience.

Maybe you feel the Spirit beckoning you to a more personal commitment to peace. Maybe you have managed to carve out some time to sit down, maybe light a candle, and just be quiet. Maybe you have spent time with an encouraging friend, said “no” to some invitations and chosen carefully which traditions to continue and which to skip. Maybe you have tried to take your time and enjoy the season with less rushing. Some of those things might make your life feel more peaceful. Maybe you've tried to avoid thinking about unpleasant things, gotten rid of stuff that reminds you of the past, ignored the news, stayed away from people or situations where you might meet conflict or discomfort, put up decorations and put on a happy face. Some of that might help... or it might just be avoidance and denial.

But finding peace – real peace – in Advent (or any time) is more than stuff we do or avoid doing, helpful or not so helpful.

I was reminded of this when I came across an interview with the Catholic writer and theologian Richard Rohr. He has a way of redirecting attention to the spiritual heart of an issue. He believes that lasting change only comes from paying attention to the state of our souls. Much as the church wants to make a difference in the world, and we as individual Christians want to make a difference in and with the way we live... we are not really equipped to do that without addressing the issues as essentially spiritual issues.

Creating some peaceful moments or joining a peace movement may accomplish something worthwhile, to be sure, but we as a church and we as individuals need to recognize that such things are not, by themselves enough to change our lives or our world. Richard Rohr's message – and it is a good one for us to hear this Advent – is that outward change comes from looking inward ...from being present to God and allowing ourselves to be aware of the presence of God around and within us. That's a really counter-cultural message, especially in a busy time like this. But there, and only there, can we really become aware that we are God's beloved children, and can begin to see the *imago dei* – the image of God – in ourselves. When we learn to see the image of God in ourselves, we begin to see the image of God also in *other* people, and in everything that God created.

This leads to a different way of thinking, that takes us away from the either-or, win-lose, us-them mentality that destroys peace, both in the world and in our lives. Rohr calls this

a single consciousness as opposed to a dual consciousness. This perspective shows us our connectedness rather than reinforcing separation. It grants dignity to all people and all life. It understands prayer and action not as different ways of being faithful but as parts of one whole. It pursues what helps all rather than what “wins” for us and our own group. It allows us to see that God is not far away but in and among us, and in the world. The contemplative mind, Rohr says, “teaches us how to see.” It opens us up to a more whole and peaceful perspective that can *really* change our lives, and the church and world besides.

What better time than Christmas to attend to the things of the soul? What better place than the manger to learn how to see – the image of God? There we meet the One who is the very image and presence of God, the baby who is the “One of peace” Micah envisioned. There, when we are willing to sit a while in the darkness and acknowledge the shadow of death that hovers over us and our world, we find the light that illumines our souls and the ever-merciful God who will guide our footsteps in the path of peace.

Amen.

Resources:

“Rohr: Church Needs an Awakening of the Soul,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 10, 2018.