

Homily – Peace on Earth

Rob Keim

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“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!””

Peace on Earth.

When you ask the question “what do you want for Christmas,” many will say “peace on earth”.

Imagine it.

Peace... on... Earth....

Christmas is a time of strong emotions for many. It can be the joy of family, or sadness for those that are no longer with us.

It can be an eagerness to play with the new toys that have been received.

Set aside all of those things for a moment, and think about peace on earth.

I would expect to see smiles on your faces, when you think about peace on earth.

In his time here on earth, Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God, and I imagine that peace on earth is a large component of the kingdom of God.

Imagine it... peace on earth.

Do you think it can happen? Do you think we will ever get there?

It is hard to have a smile when we think about the practical nature of peace on earth.

We don't seem to be very good at it.

War

Genocide

Slavery
Sexism
Domestic violence
Violent crime

Our smiles disappear from our faces when we start thinking about the practical nature of peace on earth.

It is not very easy.

In her poem, "Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem" Maya Angelou describes our earthly existence this way.

*"Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.
Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening."*

How can we ever get away from violence?

How can we ever have peace on earth?

This was part of the message of Jesus. Two thousand years ago, Jesus came into the world to change the world. Roman society was cruel and violent. In one sense, Emperor Augustus had brought an end to the civil wars that had wracked the Roman world for decades. This was the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. However, there were still many violent wars to gather more territory into the Roman Empire, and there was an incredible amount of violence to suppress insurrection and support institutionalized slavery.

On that night two thousand years ago, the angels proclaimed a different type of peace to the shepherds in the hills that night. The peace of empire is based on oppression and violence. The peace of Jesus has no room for oppression and violence. It is a totally different power dynamic that has no room for empire.

Many of us equate reduction of violence with peace on earth, and I certainly think it is an important component.

Joshua Goldstein, professor emeritus of international relations at American University and author of *Winning the War on War*, argues that despite Iraq and Afghanistan, Congo and Sudan, the past 10 years have seen fewer war deaths than any decade in the past 100 years. And Harvard psychologist, Steven Pinker, goes even further. In his book *The Better Angels of our Nature*, he contends that we may be living in the most peaceful period in the history of our species. “

The authors of these two books demonstrate that the four thousand years of recorded history have been bloody times. During much of history more than a quarter of the population died violently. Even with the genocides of Africa or the wars of the Middle East, violent deaths are down today.

In addition, over the last one hundred years, it seems like we have seen a lot of improvement in the rights of women and the rights of gays and lesbians. We certainly have a lot more room for improvement, but here in the U.S. we have begun to share rights and even power beyond rich, white, straight men.

It is hard to believe since violence seems to be in the news every day. It may be that mass media has just made us more aware of violence and that this is actually a time when we have less violence compared to other centuries.

The two authors, Goldstein and Pinker, attribute the drop in violence to three things.

First strong nation states and judicial systems have taken over the responsibility for punishment and eliminated the endless cycles of revenge, vendetta and blood feud. When you've got the state and the judicial system meting out punishment you end the cycle at one rather than continue with an ongoing cycle of violence.

The second reason for the drop is the rise of prosperity and interdependence so that you don't get rich by conquering territory anymore, you get rich by trade, and war doesn't work for that.

And, the third reason for the drop in violence is the rise of the United Nations and peacekeeping, which has given the international community a way to manage and reduce conflicts, not to bring about world peace in one big gulp but to go into war zones where formerly ceasefires would break down more than half of the time.

So in this way, maybe we are getting a bit more peace on earth. Perhaps as a people we are getting less violent. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were true?

Perhaps the promises of the enlightenment, reason and modernity are finally coming true.

As human beings we have finally figured out how to start pulling ourselves out of the mire of violence. We are using our minds, our technology, and our economics to make the world less violent.

Wouldn't this be a grand Christmas present? A reduction in violence and hardship.

Now, this is an important component of peace on earth, but I think there are two other parts of the peace on earth being proclaimed by the angels.

We also need to learn how to be healthy about power.

Jesus came to turn the tables. Jesus came to challenge the power structure of Rome and to say that there is a different way. Holding power is not the way to achieve real peace. Instead, learning to unshackle ourselves from our desire for power is the way of real peace.

This message was true for the Roman Empire and it is still true for us today in America, the one remaining super power. This is part of the Christmas message that is relevant for us as we live in another empire. Power is something Americans are very familiar with. We have a lot of it.

Power is one of those things that separates us, one from another. Power is one of those things that lift some up while it pushes others down.

Two thousand years ago, the angels came to proclaim the arrival of Jesus to the shepherds. Shepherds were some of the lowliest members of society back then. In fact they were about as low as you could get. Yet these were the people that were the first to hear the good news.

During his whole life, Jesus continued to work with and walk with the lowest of society.

It is a grand thing if violence is diminishing in the world, and wouldn't it also be a grand thing if we finally learned how to give up power.

Now, there is a last part of peace on earth. This is the peace that passes all understanding. This is the supernatural peace that we can have in the midst of a less than perfect world and life. This is the peace that can only come from God.

We can have this kind of peace, genuine peace, profound peace, only when we are right with God, when we have been reconciled to God, when we understand that God loves us, cares for us, and is always present with us.

We can have peace only when we welcome Jesus as the Messiah. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our relationship with God has been healed. The re-creation of the universe has begun. The Holy Creator has declared and continues to declare us to be righteous, and acceptable in His holy eyes. Through Jesus we have once again become God's beloved sons and daughters.

Now, here's a little language lesson.

Shalom is a Hebrew word of greeting that actually means "peace". Isn't that a nice thing to say to one another? Instead of saying hello or goodbye you say "peace".

Shalom.

"Through Jesus, we are promised that we will experience, not just shalom - peace, but "shalom, shalom" perfect peace, complete peace, the fullness of peace, so that not the tiniest little bit of peace is lacking or missing.

That peace that is supernatural, that peace that is incomprehensible, that peace that passes the understanding of human beings comes to those who lean on God in their thoughts and prayers, who lay their mental weight on God.

That complete peace comes to those who train their minds to think about God and God's ways, who depend on the Almighty to hold them up, who continually look to God for help, guidance, support and direction; who trust in the Lord, and not in themselves and their own goodness and strength (which will always be lacking), or in a religious system, or in humanity. No, trust is in God alone."

We can have peace because we know that God is good, and has our best interests in His loving heart and powerful mind.

We can have peace knowing that God has pledged to take care of us. We can cast our cares on Her, because She cares for us.

We can have peace because God keeps His promises. We can have peace because the eternal God is trustworthy, reliable, and never changes.”

Let us all pray for a continued reduction in violence around the world. In addition, let us pray to break the shackles of power.

And most of all let ask for the best Christmas present of all, the peace that passes all understanding.

Shalom, shalom and Merry Christmas.