12-21/22-19 Altogether Peace Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 1:18-25 Advent 4

Almost 20 years ago, Sandra Bullock played Gracie Hart in a movie called Miss Congeniality.

Gracie was an undercover FBI agent in a beauty pageant, a spoof on the ugly duckling turned swan concept, and during the question-and-answer session of the pageant, her honesty was met with awkward silence. Finally, she added the words, “and world peace” to her answer,

and the audience erupted in applause. They may not have wanted to actively work for world peace, yet they wanted to hear that hope in every contestant’s answer.

Contrast that audience’s surface level desire for peace to the Christmas card of a retired Air Force General. On the front was a white dove with an olive branch in its beak, hovering above the world. Inside the card were these words: “Peace on earth.” Yet beside those words the general had added a big question mark and wrote, “Is peace possible in a world like this?”

He knew the challenge of peace firsthand, the challenge of ending war and conflict.

--Bill Bouknight “Is There Hope for World Peace” preaching.com adapted

Is peace possible? We yearn for world peace. We yearn for peace with those around us.

We yearn for peace within ourselves. We desire peace that is the absence of conflict. The end of war. We desire peace on earth.

Yet, we also admit that as long as people are different, there will always be conflict. Somewhere in our world. Often in our lives.

Every day our news feeds are filled with the results of the absence of peace.

gang violence

military conflict

families fleeing their home countries, afraid for their lives

fights and shootings from broken relationships

harmful words spoken and trust betrayed

prejudicial ways that lead to division

Every day we often struggle with conflict within our own hearts.

Fear for the future

Low self-worth

Guilt and shame

The inability to forgive

The challenge to tame the wild beasts of anger, fear and powerlessness

Peace often seems miles away.

That is not a cheery thought this close to Christmas, is it? Yet, how true is it, that peace often seems miles away, and we all struggle with peace?

Not only in our world, but also in our hearts. We struggle for peace in our relationships with others as well as amid the pressures we put on ourselves to have the perfect Christmas. We struggle to find peace with God among the doubts and questions of our faith.

If you have every struggled to find peace, especially at this time of year, take heart. You are not alone!

Take heart! This is not a new phenomenon. Since Cain and Abel had conflicts with one another,

there has always been a yearning for peace on earth. Since Cain killed Abel there has also almost always been war and division.

In the past 4000 years there have only been 286 years that saw peace. This, in spite of thousands of peace treaties.

-taken from sermonillustrations.com:peace

We yearn for the words of the angels in Luke to come true, that good news proclaimed to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2:14)

We long for these words to come true! Peace on earth. Goodwill to all.

We long for peace. And peace can come to pass—if we change our understanding of peace,

if we broaden our definition of peace beyond the absence of conflict.

Throughout this season of Advent, we have been encouraged to live as altogether Christians,

living by altogether hope, altogether love, altogether joy, and now today, altogether peace.

Throughout this season of Advent, we have been invited to broaden our definition of a Christian, challenged by the words of John Wesley to the early Methodists in 1741,

to move from an almost to an altogether Christian.

An almost Christian is one who has the outward appearance of godliness, doing all the basic things right like attending worship and being kind to others and striving to be a good person,

yet the almost Christian lacks a deep relationship with Christ.

An altogether Christian is one who unreservedly and wholeheartedly trusts God and puts that trust into action, loving God and neighbor from the depths of their hearts and souls, in response to Christ’s presence in their lives.

-taken from “Almost Christmas” p.7-8 Abingdon Press

Today, we reflect on an almost peace and an altogether peace.

An almost peace is more concerned with the good face we project to those around us, even when within us we feel anything but peaceful. An almost peace is more about performance than reality. An almost peace may include an absence of conflict, yet the reasons for the conflict have not yet been truly resolved, so our peace is a forced peace.

An altogether peace, however, is peace in the midst of conflict. An altogether peace is found within us, no matter what is happening around us, and then radiates out from within us.

An altogether peace is a gift from God, the gift of God with us, even in chaos and turmoil.

..There was once a man who was in search of a perfect picture of peace. He announced a contest to produce this masterpiece. The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Yet when the final submission was revealed, the crowd was shocked. At first the painting seemed to be the furthest thing from a picture of peace. A waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; stormy, gray clouds exploded with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the scene, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls, and a bird rested in a nest in the elbow of a branch. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcended all the turmoil.

-Berit Kjos, A Wardrobe from the King, 2002, preaching.com:peace

That is the peace God desires for each and every one of us here today. That is the peace God desires for us as a community of faith. Peace that comes from understanding God is with us,

in whatever turmoil we face.

Peace is much more than the absence of conflict.

The world into which Jesus was born was ruled by the Pax Romana, or Roman peace. It was the absence of war, but was not a peace without conflict. Rome ruled with power and might. Rome crushed any opposition through brutal killings and high taxes and terrorizing territorial rulers such as King Herod.

Nowadays, some countries appear to be peaceful, yet it is a forced peace that does not allow for dissenting voices or ideas that differ from the ruler or ruling party.

Nowadays, some homes appear to be peaceful, yet are led by parents or spouses that demand peace through violence or emotional abuse.

This forced peace is not what God desires for our lives and for our world.

What God desires for peace is shalom.

Shalom is the Hebrew word we translate as peace, yet this peace is so much more than just the absence of conflict. Shalom also speaks of completeness and fullness. Shalom is wholeness not only within us but among us. Shalom is the restoration of all creation. Shalom is the fullness of health and prosperity for all God’s beloved. Shalom cannot be fulfilled if we are content and our neighbor is not.

Shalom is also the gift of God’s presence, which grounds us in God and God’s ways even in the midst of the storms in our lives. Imagine the shalom Joseph needed when Mary told him she was pregnant. Unlike the Gospel of Luke, which focuses on Mary’s emotions as well as the rejoicing at Jesus’ birth, the Gospel of Matthew focuses on Joseph’s journey.

Like many young people dreaming and planning for the future, Joseph thought he had his life all planned out—until real life interrupted. He was a righteous man, of the lineage of David. He had a solid business as a woodworker built up in Nazareth and the surrounding area.

When Mary shared the unexpected news of her pregnancy, Joseph’s carefully planned out life was turned upside down. When she insisted the baby was from God, the long-awaited Messiah,

Joseph didn’t know what to think or say or do.

His dreams of a quiet future as a humble carpenter, an obedient Jew, and a loving husband and father were shattered.

Joseph struggled to believe her story and struggled with how to respond. Could it be possible that the Scriptures would be fulfilled in his lifetime, let alone in his family? At first, he didn’t believe Mary’s story. Her child as the Messiah? How could that be true?

Joseph struggled with what to do. As a faithful Jew, he knew that the Law stated that he needed to publicly condemn her of adultery and lead the religious leaders in stoning her to death.

Yet this was his intended, the woman he wanted to love and care for the rest of his life, and he was reluctant to publicly humiliate her and sentence her to death.

He wondered, ought he to find some way to send her away quietly, giving her a bill of divorce out of the public eye? Ought he to marry her, raise the child as his own, and risk ruining his own reputation?

Joseph decided to divorce her quietly, to lessen their disgrace. His decision made, Joseph rested—and that is when God changed Joseph’s mind. That is when God gave Joseph a different type of peace.

The Scriptures proclaim:

“An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

‘Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife,

because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus,

because he will save his people from their sins.’”

Joseph quietly obeyed the command of the Lord and took Mary to his house as his wife,

claiming her son as his own, risking his own reputation.

Joseph moved from the peace of contentment in his circumstances to the peace of God’s presence in the midst of life’s uncertainties and struggles. Next Sunday we will continue Joseph’s story and how he continued to live by altogether trust.

Notice that God did not offer Joseph peace that is the absence of conflict. God did not miraculously change the hearts and minds of the skeptics that lived in Nazareth. God did not miraculously smooth out the journey that Joseph and Mary were about to face, not only the road to Bethlehem, but also their escape to Egypt. Instead, God offered Joseph the peace of God’s presence.

This is altogether peace. The gift of God. The gift of God with us.

Peace was a gift to Joseph and Mary long ago. Peace is also a gift to each and every one of us here today.

This peace of God does not take away our conflict, our brokenness, our darkness or our pain.

Instead, this peace shines God’s light and hope and love into the shattered pieces of our lives.

Peace reminds us that whatever we face in life, God is with us, seeking to redeem and restore us, as individuals and as a community of faith.

Jesus is God’s gift of peace, love, joy and hope for the world.

When we look at the entirety of Jesus’ life, from birth to teachings and healings to his death and resurrection, we see a recurring, connecting thread:

...Jesus came to bring peace. He was born into a world that needed peace. He lived in a world that needed peace. And he was leaving behind a world that would need to know peace.

-Matt Rawle “Altogether Christmas” p.23 Abingdon Press

The night before Jesus died, he offered one last gift to his disciples. In John 14:27 Jesus declared, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.”

Rev. Matt Rawle describes the power of this peace of Jesus. He wrote:

Jesus isn’t just wishing them peace. He isn’t just offering a blessing for peace. He isn’t simply saying, “I’m giving you some sentiment of peace.” He said, “My peace I give to you.” He is offering a part of himself. He is leaving them a part of who he is as a way to help them through their troubled times.

Think about what that would have meant to those disciples—those people who, for three and a half years, would have witnessed Jesus demonstrate some remarkable abilities for peace.

That same Jesus was able to sleep on a boat in the middle of a storm. He showed these disciples how to be calm amid the storms of life and how to settle the waves and wind with just a single word. He was giving them that peace from within himself.

That same Jesus was able to stand up to those who were finding fault with him, challenging him in public, and seeking to undermine everything he was trying to do for good. He showed them how to speak up without shame, to walk through the crowds without fear, to stand up for what is right, and even to forgive his tormentors as he was on the cross. He was giving them that peace from within himself.

That same Jesus was able to stare death squarely in the eye at the graveside of Lazarus and at the bedside of Jairus’s daughter. He spoke a word of comfort to grieving and a word of hope about the Resurrection. Jesus was giving them that kind of peace, the ability to name your grief and acknowledge your loss, and to know that death is not the final word.

That same Jesus drew together, shaped, and empowered a group of ragtag disciples, drawn from all walks of life, from various political perspectives, who were often at one another’s throats with competition and one-upmanship: Matthew the conservative, Peter the liberal,

and every type of person in-between. He was giving them that kind of peace, that ability to unite together on the one thing that mattered most: serving one another in love.

And you know what? Jesus is giving you that same kind of peace as well.

-Matt Rawle “Altogether Christmas” p.25-26 Abingdon Press

Jesus is the Prince of Peace, who offers us the gift of altogether peace.

His peace is what guides us through the storms of life, a peace that transcends the calm and chaos of Christmas celebrations and struggles. His peace is what guides us back into right relationships with God, ourselves and one another. His peace is what guides us to worship

as we remember who and whose we are.

This weekend before Christmas, let us claim this gift of peace.

Then let us become doers of peace.

With our family and our friends

With one another and with strangers

Within our community and within our world

Let us allow peace to be a gift not only for our lives, but also a gift to all of our relationships.

As doers of peace, God can work through and among us to restore and transform our relationships. Then through our relationships, God can re-create our communities, and finally our world.

Let there be God’s altogether peace on earth, and let it begin with us.

May it be so. Let us pray.