

God's Promise of Peace

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Advent, December 7, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's an ancient legend that on the morning of our Lord's birth there was a brief moment of universal peace around the world. John Milton spoke of that legend in a poem. He wrote,

No war, or battle's sound
was heard the world around;
The idle spear and shield were high uphung;
The hook'd chariot stood
Unstained with hostile blood;
The trumpet spake not to the arm'd throng;
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by.

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began.

It's a beautiful thought, the idea of one brief moment of peace on earth, but it's only a legend.

Or is it? Could there be some truth in that legend that not even human cynicism can destroy? Some three hundred years after the birth of Jesus, St. Athanasius, one of the greatest of the ancient church Fathers, wrote about what happened to barbarian tribes when they became Christians.

Those barbarians who have an innate savagery of manners, while they still sacrifice to the idols of their country, are mad against one another, and cannot endure to be a single hour without weapons; but when they hear the teaching of Christ, straightway instead of arming their hands with weapons they raise them in prayer.

Here, it seems, the legend has come true. Savages who received Jesus as their Lord, disarmed. Their warlike nature was changed. Instead of raising their arms to fight, they raised them to pray. Here, it seems to me, is the answer to the question of world peace. First, having Jesus ruling over us and our nation and, secondly, letting him change our warlike

nature.

First, Isaiah saw in the coming of the Messiah hope for lasting peace. Listen once more to the description of the Messiah.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots (He's talking about a descendent of King David whose father was named Jesse). And the Spirit of GOD shall rest upon this branch, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of GOD. And the delight of the one who comes shall be in the fear of GOD. That one shall not judge by what the eyes see, or decide by what the ears hear; but shall judge the poor with righteousness, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth, and smite the earth with words of judgment, and slay the wicked with sentences. The coming one shall be girded with righteousness, and girded also with faithfulness.

Listen to those characteristics! His chief characteristic is that his delight is in the fear of God. And listen to his platform! He's especially concerned about the poor and the meek and he will destroy the wicked, not by weapons, but by the authority of his word. Do you think anybody with those characteristics or that platform could get elected president? Wouldn't the news media have a field-day. They'd talk about his his naivete and moralistic attitude. Can we honestly say that our nation, or any nation, is looking to the person described by Isaiah for their defense?

On all our coins it says, "In God we trust." But do we? Isn't our nation exactly like the atheistic Soviet Union, trusting primarily to missile systems, bombs and sophisticated weaponry for salvation. Many people feel that our nation is becoming increasingly aggressive, something that's entirely out of character with our traditional distrust of standing armies and large defense budgets. The Liberal of the 1960s was often characterized as someone who thought poverty could be wiped out simply by spending more and more money. Today there's a widespread feeling that our nation's security can be achieved simply by spending more and more money.

Yet with 10,000 tons of TNT available to defend every man, woman and child on earth, why do we feel so afraid? The more we spend on defense the less secure we feel. A Gallup poll asked, "In your opinion, how likely is it that within the next ten years there will be an all-out nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union?" 69 percent felt there was a chance it would happen and 30 percent of them felt there was a good chance it would happen. Some thought it was certain to happen. Our weapons simply ~~do~~ don't give us a sense of security. It seems that, as a nation, we neither trust God or weapons to save us.

I truly believe that world peace doesn't have a chance until the world really trusts in the one of whom Isaiah spoke. And the trusting must first begin with us as a nation. It won't do any good to say to Russia, "I'll trust Christ if you trust him first." Trust in Christ means believing that Jesus isn't simply interested in the religious part of our lives. It means believing that the Risen Christ is Lord, even in the political realm, and that he really is Lord of lords, and King of kings. Trusting in Christ means obeying Christ, praying and working for his kingdom to stretch from shore to shore, and using his means to accomplish his ends. Do we really trust that his way, the way of the cross, the way of identification with the oppressed, the poor, and the suffering, is the only way to peace?

Secondly, world peace depends upon a change in nature. The wolf must stop attacking lambs and eating them. That requires a change of nature. And the lamb needs a change of nature. Woody Allen says that the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep. The lamb ~~won't~~ won't get much sleep unless its nature is changed. Only a radical change could ever make a lamb trusting enough to get any sleep living with wolves.

Isaiah wasn't talking about wolves and lambs. He was talking about human nature. There's within all of us, both Americans and Russians, a wolf that wants to attack and kill and devour. That nature must be changed if we're ever to enjoy world peace. And there's within all of us a Lamb that's frightened of wolves even when protected by millions of nuclear warheads. And that lamb is going to need a new nature before it's going to be able to trust a wolf even if that wolf has been converted. The great question is, "Do you believe that Christ can change your nature? Do you want Christ to change your nature?"

This is why Jesus came. He came to change our nature. Jesus didn't come simply to make us *better* men and women, more polite and well adjusted. He came to make us *new*. He came to change our nature. He came to give us a new birth. So you see, the greatest hindrance to world peace doesn't lie with the Soviet Union which is officially atheistic. It lies with men and women who say they trust in Jesus as Savior but are afraid to follow him as Lord. The greatest hindrance to world peace lies with men and women who are unwilling or unready to be converted.

John the Baptist came as a forerunner of Christ. He came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repent! That means, "Change!" Change your mind! Change your heart. Change the very way you think about everything, including war and defense and security. Change your very nature! Rather, believe that Christ can change you.

If ancient Israel's history is anything to go by, then when genuine godliness holds sway in a nation, God's providence provides a nation's main defense. But when godliness is forsaken and God's laws are trodden underfoot, God sends judgment, sometimes in the form of strong, aggressive and godless nations, and no amount of nuclear weapons can protect us. It's

ultimate foolishness and idolatry to think that our defense can be assured by bigger and bigger defense budgets. Apart from a humble repentance and a sincere covenant renewal of God's people with their Lord, lasting peace will never have a chance.

The good news is that sometimes a miracle takes place and people do trust in Jesus and their natures are changed.

On Christmas Eve, in the year 1870, the birthday of Christ approached one corner of the world with the whine of rifle bullets, the boom of artillery, the moans of the wounded, the sounds of war. This was the Franco-Prussian War, and Paris was besieged by the Germans. French soldiers and German soldiers faced each other in the trenches before the city. Work on the trenches had been suspended because the temperature was 12 degrees below zero and the ground was frozen to a depth of 20 inches.

At that moment the Germans were winning the tug-of-war and the battle itself. French soldiers were hungry and suffering from frostbite and freezing to death. On the German side there was a Christmas tree in every post and lavish Christmas dinners, with beer for the troops and champagne for the officers. In the German headquarters at Versailles, the commanders had sent word that the long-awaited bombardment of Paris was to start soon. Back on the field of conflict artillery shells burst and steel and shot thudded into the frozen embankments-- and sometimes into the flesh of living men.

But as darkness approached this Christmas Eve the artillery exchanges stopped. Rifle fire became sporadic. Sometimes it was many minutes before a shot was fired. Then a strange stillness came over the battlefield. French and German soldiers alike put down their rifles and

thought about home and happier Christmas Eves. And they thought about Jesus who on that night so many years ago was born, the Prince of Peace. Suddenly, a young French soldier jumped from his trench and stood unarmed in full view of his enemy. And in a beautiful voice he astonished the Germans across the scarred terrain of 'no-man's land' by singing "O holy night".

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

The Germans were awestruck. Not a shot was fired at this young French soldier silhouetted against the sky. His voice penetrated every misery and heartache of war. And when he had finished his song, the Frenchman continued to stand there, out in the open, defenseless, without a weapon, like a lamb in the midst of wolves. And as he stood there, he heard another voice from across no-man's land responding. It was the voice of his enemy, of a German soldier whose thoughts were far, far from war. He, too, had left his trench, and he sang Martin Luther's Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above to Earth I come." And for a little while, peace and the spirit of Jesus Christ reigned.

Friends, peace is possible. To believe otherwise is a denial of the Gospel. But peace can be achieved only by trusting in Christ and in the way of the cross. Peace can be achieved only when we're willing to let Christ change our nature.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.