

## The First Sunday of Advent

*"PEACE: P = Presence"*

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Since the end of October, I've been digging into the early chapters of the book of the prophet *Isaiah*. There's definitely a reason people jump to the conclusion that the Old Testament, the books from *Genesis* to *Malachi*, portray a God who is hard and harsh. There's a lot of violence revealed in those pages. It is hard to read and hard to accept that God used the violence of war, nation against nation, as part of his way of refining his people – as part of his way of causing them to cry out to Him to save them.

In the beginning chapters of *Isaiah*, we read how God can barely look upon his people. *"I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand"* (Isaiah 1:2,3). *"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening."* (Isaiah 1:15)

There is no peace in Judah. There is no peace in Jerusalem. They have not obeyed the Lord. They have worshipped other gods. They have plundered when they were to leave well enough alone. They have rebelled, choosing to put their ways above God's ways – choosing to justify their disobedience with many words twisted just so. Isaiah 3:8, *"Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling; their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence."* There is no peace.

And then, in the midst of such words of accusation, distress, and darkness, we read this word in Isaiah 9:1: *Nevertheless*. *Nevertheless*. Which means, 'in spite of...' 'Although what you have heard (or read) is true, *nevertheless* there is a conclusion coming that is different than what you might expect.' What a beautiful word in the midst of such darkness to the people of God. *Nevertheless*. (Isaiah 9:1-7)

*"Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.*

*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.*

*For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.*

*You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice.*

*They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing the plunder.*

*For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.*

*You will break the oppressor's rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.*

*The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned.*

*They will be fuel for the fire.*

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders.*

*And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His government and its peace will never end.*

There is a promise that the darkness, the despair, the grief, the pain, the chaos, the shouting matches, the greed, the violence will one day end. There is a promise that one day a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace will arrive whose leadership over his people will be peaceful – a peaceful, unending governing for those who live in the Kingdom of God.

That day has come, friends. The child has been born. The Son has been given. The Prince of Peace has come. To us. To all who open their heart to the truth that though we are sinners, though we have been sinners since birth, though we have been rebellious, though we have been horribly disobedient and have treated one another terribly, brother to brother, sister to sister, parent to child, and child to parent, though we have chosen our own way over His way, though we deserve nothing but the stiff-arm-treatment from God and worse, *nevertheless*. *Nevertheless* "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life." (John 3:16).

Jesus came into this world not just to help us, but to save us from living in despair and darkness and empty self-absorption forever, making choice after choice after choice that is not honoring to him.

Pastor and author Louie Giglio wrote this in his Advent devotional *Waiting Here for You*, "Jesus doesn't just give you what you need; Jesus is what you need. Your heart was created by Him, for Him. You can fight and claw to gain the world, but without Jesus, you will never be completely satisfied. If there is a growing discontent deep inside your heart – a hunger that hasn't been completely satisfied by the people, pleasures, parties, material things, or accomplishments – today is the day to open your heart to the idea that it is Jesus that you were made for. But you have to walk away from 'less,' and ask Him to become your 'more.' Jesus is enough for you, and He is here."

A new song by Hillsong entitled "When I Think Upon Christmas," includes these words:  
*When I think upon Christmas, words can't express how our Father in Heaven has sent us His best  
to be born in a manger, the king in the hay. And creation will worship His Name.*

*For the joy of the world He was born, bringing peace to us all through the gift of the Son.*

*Now the darkest of ages are done for the Savior of Heaven has come.*

Do you believe that? That the darkest of ages are done because Jesus has come? It can be hard to get there in our minds because the times we are in seem very dark, don't they? So much rebellion, so much hatred and bitterness, so many power-games, so much heartache and pain. And you don't even have to turn on the news to see and hear it. It's right here in our own families. Right here in our own hearts. Rebellion. Unforgiveness. Heartache. Hopelessness. Some of us live in the past. Some live burdened by regret. Some live always wishing we were somewhere else or even someone else. We don't have to look outward to see the effects of sin. It's right here within us and all around us.

Nevertheless, a child has been born for us. The Promised One who arose as a shoot from the charred remains of a desecrated land. The Son has been given for us. The Prince of Peace has come. Jesus was born in order to die so that you and I might live in peace forever. He took the punishment we deserve for every sinful word, thought, or action we have ever done and will ever do. He took it all! All the violence we read about in the Old Testament was brought about to bring God's people closer to Him, to cause them to look to the only One who could save them. But it was temporary. It was fleeting.

But not Jesus. His Presence is not temporary. His salvation is not fleeting. His peace is real and knows no end.

I have a dear friend who is very sick and in hospice care. We spoke on Wednesday on the phone. She is joyful. She is peaceful. She said, "Meagan, when you've had a near-death experience and been given a glimpse, you can't wait to go again and not be yanked back this time." Dick Eckels' mom, Elaine Eckels, who died on November 20<sup>th</sup>, had been unresponsive for 24 hours. Dick and Julie were repositioning her in the bed when she spoke so clearly. She said, "I'm on my way!" Julie asked, "Where are you going?" She answered, "I'm going to the party." She never spoke another word on this side of Heaven. Oh friends, of his peace there will be no end.

I believe that. I know that. The darkest of ages are done for the Savior of Heaven has come. He has come to us. He is Immanuel, God with us. He brings peace because He is peace. He told his disciples before he was crucified, "*Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*" (John 14:27)

As we begin our journey to Christmas Day, my challenge to all of us is to take the E for effort out of PEACE and live a more intentional PACE. Slow our minds. Slow our steps. Remember what this is all about. Let us fix our eyes on the truth that as believers in Jesus, all that we need, we already have. The world says a Merry Christmas is all about the presents, nevertheless, we know it is all about the presence of the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. Who do we need to tell this good news to this season? With whom should we share the truth of where true peace comes from this season?

As we come to the Table this morning, let us worship God with grateful hearts as we commune with Him and with one another in this marvelous, mysterious Sacrament that unites us with the saints in Heaven and the saints on earth by the precious sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the giver of unshakable, immovable, unending peace.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we come knowing our sin. It is ever before us. We know that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed. Nevertheless, you forgive us. You love us. Your mercy is for us. Your peace fills us. Thank you for rescuing us. Thank you for showing us the

way of love, of hope, and of peace. I pray in this moment for anyone who has not yet put their faith in you, who has been waiting for this very moment, this very opportunity to say yes to you. Come, Lord Jesus. There is room in our hearts for you. May we never defying your glorious presence. (Silence). May the bread we break and the cup we bless be for us a true communion, uniting us in faith and perfect peace today and for all eternity. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.