

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
December 11, 2011 – Third Sunday of Advent

Prince of Peace
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14

For Advent and Christmas this year, we're focusing on the great messianic names that are found in Is. 9: For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace*. The first week, we looked at the name "Everlasting Father" – God is powerful but also personal. Last week, we looked at "Wonderful Counselor" – the Messiah is the source of truth, wisdom, and encouragement. Today, we'll look at the title "Prince of Peace."

The word peace appears in the Christmas passage we just read from Luke 2. In v. 14, when the multitude of angels appears before the shepherds, they praise God and say, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, *peace* among those whom he favors." Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the name "Prince of Peace."

Notice at the end of v. 14 there's a footnote – footnote k. Always pay attention to footnotes – they often alert you to important things. Footnote k says, "Other ancient authorities read *peace, goodwill among people*." The reason this footnote is here is because in Greek the word is *eudokia*, which

means “good will.” And in fact, that’s how the old King James Version translated this verse: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will towards men.” That’s what the shepherds heard that night – that God’s good decision is peace for humanity.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Prince of Peace? We’re living in a world of war and conflict. Peace is what we long for in our lives, but it’s the thing that’s often missing. But sometimes we get a glimpse of the power of peace, as in the following story.

World War I dragged on for four years, with more than 8 million soldiers killed and hundreds of thousands more dying from injuries. However, on Christmas Eve in 1914, one of the most unusual episodes in military history unfolded at various locations along the Western front. That night, soldiers in the trenches on the German side began lighting candles. British sentries reported that there appeared to be small lights, raised on poles or bayonets. Although the lights clearly illuminated the German troops, making them vulnerable to being shot, the British held their fire. Even more amazing, British officers saw through binoculars that some enemy troops were holding Christmas trees over their heads with lighted candles in their branches. The message was clear: the Germans were extending holiday greetings to their enemies.

A few German soldiers began singing a Christmas carol. It was soon picked up all along the German line as other soldiers joined in harmonizing. British troops immediately recognized the song as “Silent Night” and began singing in English along with the Germans.

One by one, British and German soldiers began laying down their weapons to venture into “no man’s land,” a small patch of bombed-out earth between the two sides. So many soldiers on both sides ventured out that superior officers were prevented from objecting.

In his wartime diary, eyewitness Frank Richards described this unofficial truce: “We stuck up a board with ‘Merry Christmas’ on it. The enemy stuck up a similar one. Two of our men threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads as two of the Germans did the same, our two going to meet them. They shook hands and then we all got out of the trench and so did the Germans.”

That night, enemy soldiers sat around a common campfire. They exchanged small gifts from their meager belongings – chocolate bars, buttons, badges, and small tins of processed beef. Men who only hours earlier had been shooting to kill were now sharing Christmas festivities and showing each other family snapshots.

The truce ended just as it had begun, by mutual agreement. In one location, for example, a British officer and a German officer who had exchanged gifts earlier bowed, saluted and climbed back into their trenches. The German officer fired two shots into the air, and the war was on again.¹

It's unfortunate that the fighting continued, but for a brief instant, those soldiers sought out and found a bit of real peace. Jesus teaches us that an act like this should have top priority for his followers.

The word for peace in Hebrew is shalom. Shalom is such a rich word that it has been translated in a number of ways. According to Strong's Concordance shalom can mean completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation or discord. All these definitions can be boiled down to three main ones.

First, shalom means absence of conflict (Greek *irene*). Peace means no more fighting. That's the most obvious meaning for peace. Jesus called his disciples to put away their swords, "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9), and he called for us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In

¹ Victor M. Parachin, "The Carol that Stopped a War," *Presbyterians Today*, Dec. 2011, 28.

other words, Jesus called for us to stop fighting. And certainly you need absence of conflict to have peace, but peace is more than that. You know that you can have a fight with someone, and stop the fight, but not have real peace.

My family is originally from North Korea. They came down to South Korea right before the Korean War, which ran from 1950 to 1953. In July of 1953, the war ceased with an armistice that created the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) near the 38th Parallel. I've had a chance to visit the DMZ – it's one of the most heavily guarded areas in the world. I've looked over into North Korea, my ancestral home. There was a cessation of hostilities with the creation of the DMZ, but there is no real peace between North and South Korea.

A second meaning of shalom is salvation – peace means to be salvaged, to be healed (Greek *soter*). 1 John 4:14 tells us, “the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.” In his earthly ministry Jesus healed and made whole a multitude of people. He restored people to health from sickness and disease, restored outcasts like Zacchaeus back to society, and even restored life to the dead Lazarus. What was true 2000 years ago is still true today: Jesus saves and heals.

There are many instances when you can't heal yourself – for example, you can't perform brain surgery on yourself. We need someone else to help us when we can't save ourselves. If your cruise ship sinks and you're stranded in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, it doesn't matter how good a swimmer you are, you won't be able to swim to shore and save yourself. You need someone else to save you. Peace means being saved and made whole as well as absence of conflict.

A third meaning of the word shalom is to be complete, whole, and fulfilled (Greek *telios*). It's also been translated as "perfect" in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The Greek word that's translated perfect doesn't mean perfect in the sense of being free from any error or defect; instead, it means to be "complete" in the sense of being "full-grown" or "mature." In other words, this perfection has to do with becoming a certain type of person. It has to do with becoming the complete, whole, mature, full version of ourselves. A few verses earlier in Matthew, Jesus offers his description of being fully and "perfectly" human—it's not about physique, intelligence, or abilities. It's about meekness and longing for God.

Jesus modeled this kind of peace in his life. He regularly would go to a deserted place early in the morning to pray (Mark 1:35), keeping his

relationship with God the Father whole and healthy. He lived a balanced life between work and rest. He enjoyed spending time with his many friends. Jesus' life was a model of faith, love, and integrity. He "carried out his ministry fully" (2 Tim. 4:5). He knew his journey of faith would not be easy, and in fact he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that, if possible, the cup leading to the cross be passed from him. Yet he continued to trust in God, and he fulfilled his ministry by dying on the cross and then overcoming the powers of death.

Frederick Buechner says "no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons us."² That's the sense of this third meaning of *shalom*: completion, wholeness, and fulfillment. In Jesus, all things hold together. Do we have that kind of peace in our lives?

Our world needs all three kinds of peace: absence of conflict, salvation/healing, and wholeness/fulfillment. That's the kind of peace that Jesus offers, the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). That's the gift of Christmas to us. Amen.

² Frederick Buechner, *Longing for Home*, p. 110.