

First Sunday of Advent  
December 2, 2018  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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### **On the Way to True Peace**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Paul writes:

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Paul and the congregation at Thessalonica pretty obviously had a relationship of love and gratitude. Paul thanks God for them. He feels joy when he thinks of them. And he prays earnestly that he and Silas may return to them for their mutual benefit.

Paul's mood is one that is quite appropriate to Advent. He is excited, thankful, and looking forward. But his excitement is restrained. This is a restrained excitement, not a celebration in advance. The new has not yet come, but the signs are beginning to show themselves. Such is the way of Advent.

At this time of year, it isn't very hard to find images of restrained excitement. One only need look at the trees and bushes now entering dormancy. They appear to be dead. Most, if not all, of their leaves have been shed. Their color is gone.

But look more closely with an eye that is tuned to the signs, and the evidence is clear. The shoots, the tiny beginnings of leaves and blossoms, are there already on many species. New life even now is ready to spring forth at the first warm opportunity.

Several bushes and trees set their buds in the fall. If you prune your lilacs or your forsythia now, you will miss the beauty of the new life that will explode come spring. From apparent death comes life, and giving up on that life too soon will bring death prematurely.

Back to Paul:

Now may our God...and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

The word "direct" here means "make straight and open." We hear echoes of John the baptizer. Paul urgently wants to return to his friends in Christ. And his prayer

connects well to us. As an Advent people, we pray that our way to the Lord may be straight and open; we pray that our path to our future may be made straight as well.

Then Paul speaks of how we prepare ourselves for the Advent of our God:

And may the Lord so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before...God...at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

It is important to remember that the folks in that ancient Greek congregation expected the final Advent—the end of time—at any moment. Paul’s encouragement for them comes with assurance that opposition is to be expected, and that they are to stand firm.

This too is good advice for us. Trouble is unavoidable in doing the radical work of God in the world. When it comes, our response is not to give up but to stand firm. We stand and look for the Spirit to strengthen our hearts. We stand at the ready, waiting expectantly for the coming of our Lord.

Human beings are possessed of a universal hope and longing for a better future. At the end of Thessalonians, Paul writes of the “God of peace” whom he prays will sanctify the people that they may “be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord.” Our longing, our expectant waiting—our restrained excitement—is for the peace that passes understanding and that transcends and heals the strife and warfare, the signs of destruction and the distress among nations and peoples that Luke proclaims this morning. It is a desire that is deeply rooted in who we are. The Spirit in us helps us know that we were made to live in peace with one another and with the whole creation. Our restrained excitement and our hopeful longing are for peace.

And yet, peace eludes us. We seem to be constantly at war. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the bloodiest in history. And peace continues to elude us in this century—in the Middle East, in the Sudan, in Iraq, in Somalia, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as in our cities and at our southern border. We continue to experience division and strife, brought about by greed and anger and fear. Evidence abounds in our world of groups of people locked in hatred and mistrust, caught in never-ending cycles of violence and retribution. Even our churches can become battle grounds over how the Holy Spirit is at work among us.

The conflict rages within as well as without. In an increasingly fragmented and frantic world, the quest for inner peace seems ever more urgent. We recognize that something is out of balance in our lives, that we are being pushed and pulled in ways that challenge our sense of peace and harmony. We hope and long for inner peace.

It is no wonder, then, that our hearts respond to the promise of peace. Images of peace, like the one drawn by the prophet Isaiah that will shape our celebration meal and craft this evening, beckon to us:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots, and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him..with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth... Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:1-6)

Such visions awaken our deep desire for harmony and peaceful co-existence. Israel longed for such a day, and so do we. We pray that our Advent journeys and Jesse Tree devotions will lead us along the path of peace.

The good news of the gospel is that God's reign has already begun. The kingdom of God is at hand. Luke tells us that the birth of Jesus was marked by a choir of angels, praising God and singing of peace on earth and good will among all people. Mark begins his gospel with an announcement that the time is fulfilled and God's kingdom has drawn near. The vision of peace for which we long is no longer just a far-off ideal, distant and unattainable, but a dream that can be and is being realized in this moment.

But what is the substance of this peace that Jesus brings? First and foremost, it is peace with God. In Christ, the God who created us and loves us brings us full reconciliation with God. "While we were (God's) enemies," Paul says, "we were reconciled to God" through Christ (Romans 5:10) and "therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1). We are forgiven, restored, and reconciled with God through Christ, and that bestows a peace that can never be taken away.

We have been reconciled to God in Christ, but we have also been reconciled to one another in Christ. To the Gentile Christians at Ephesus, Paul writes, "Remember that you were at (one) time without Christ... having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...For *he is our peace*..he...has broken down the dividing wall...putting to death that hostility.... So he came and proclaimed *peace* to you who were far off and *peace* to those who were near." (Ephesians 2:12-17).

In Christ, God comes to break down the walls that separate us and offers us a way to peace. And yet, true peace cannot be achieved at the cost of silencing discontented voices or oppressing the weak. The peace that God offers and calls us to is a peace built on the foundation of justice. God's peace is not achieved by the strong dominating the weak; such domination may bring a temporary end to conflict and war, but it will not bring about true peace. The kingdom of God is a peaceable kingdom, a transformed society in which each member is valued and treated with dignity. The weak and the strong live together in harmony, each caring for the other. There is no true peace without justice. We are called not only to desire this peace, but to work for it.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus tells us, “for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Finally, the peace that is offered in and through the advent of Christ is a deep and abiding peace, an inner peace that is independent of circumstance. This peace abides in joy and in suffering. It stays with us when we have a sense that God is present as well as when God seems absent. No one can take it from us. It is the gift of God in Christ. No person or circumstance can rob us of it; it is a peace that endures.

In those final hours of Maundy Thursday, as Jesus prepares to leave his disciples, he says to them (and to us), “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 let them be afraid.” (John 14:27). This peace is Christ’s gift to us. It is freedom from fear and worry along with the deep security of knowing that we are loved by God and held by God at every moment of our lives—in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, in bad times and good.

St. Seraphim of Serov has said, “Acquire peace in your heart, and thousands will find salvation around you.” When we receive and abide in that peace, the peace that only Christ can give, we become the kind of people who can live at peace with others and who can be channels of peace in our communities and in our world.

This is the kind of peace for which we long and which Christ brings us in this season—a peace that passes human understanding, that is steady and sure regardless of life’s circumstances, that endures forever. We long for that peace. And it is a peace that is offered to all.

“Make me an instrument of your peace,” prayed St. Francis, “where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.”

In these short weeks of Advent, we contemplate with restrained excitement the way of true peace, in which the walls that divide are breached, the prejudices and privileges of race or clan erode, and the powers of this world yield to the all-encompassing power of a God who loves profligately.

*“O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of (hu)mankind; bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emanuel shall come to you, O Israel.”* (from The Hymnal 1982, st. 1 & 7)

Amen. Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.