

## *“Advent Peace”*

*Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8*

December 6, 2020

Do you have some perfect Christmas memories? I do, actually. One year in particular stands out. 1978. I know, that’s getting to be a lot of years off now but, part of me, remembers that particular Christmas in Lenoir. Lenoir was where all of my Dad’s family lived and where my Grandmother’s house was. She hosted a Bryant family Christmas party every year on Christmas Eve. We’d drive up from Charlotte the day before just to spend some extra time. But, from the moment my sister and I got there, it was a countdown. A countdown to that holiday party where uncles and cousins of all shapes and sizes would arrive, filling the smallish house.

There was the holiday punch, a concoction I’ve learned is little more than pineapple juice and ginger ale but it tasted like heaven. So too were there homemade cookies and cakes and candies spread throughout the house so that you hardly had to move a yard to get something to nibble on no matter where you were in the house. Best of all, all of us kids occupied a large basement in the house where we played with my aunt’s dog lady intermixed with hide-and-seek.

Then came the magic hour, 7pm. At that point, everyone packed into the house’s small living room around a silver Christmas tree (do you remember those things?) where presents were distributed. One of the things my sister and I both loved about Lenoir Christmases was the emphasis on TOYS. My Mom’s parent’s, perhaps more practical people, were known to throw in pairs of socks and underwear amongst the toys. Not in Lenoir though. The highlight present of that year was a plastic football player that kicked field goals. I must have played with that thing until we left.

It was a perfect kids’ Christmas. Wonderful, sweet and special.

There have been years, I confess, where, at the end of the holiday festivities, I’ll think back and compare – was this year as good as 1978? And while it’s a fun way to think nostalgically, I will say, comparisons in and of themselves aren’t always as helpful as we’d like them to be.

One of the things I’ve noted is that too frequent comparison thinking is often quick to disrupt the one thing I think I desire most in this world – peace. It’s interesting to note that, as my years progress, how much more desirous of peace I am. Years back, nothing thrilled me than a late night out at a bar with a band and tons of people crowded around me. Now, I think on that stage of my life and I can hardly understand the appeal. After all, nothing pleases me more than settling into bed to read a book, the kids asleep and a feeling of calm filling the house.

But, as I said, comparisons tend to disrupt a lot of peace. We get to thinking, is this as good as it gets? Could this be better? Could I be better, improved somehow? And while that’s undoubtedly the case, sometimes the thought of it interrupts that deep tranquility of mind and body that we all seek out to soothe our souls from the bumps, bruises and scrapes this broken world foists upon us day after day.

Take for example this obsessive emphasis we seem to have on attaining perfection. One need only look around at images on television and in magazines to see a world of data on the subject. The images show idealized bodies. To top it all off, when things aren’t quite right, then a quick computer “touch up” makes the unsightly parts of people or stories go away. The cumulative effect leaves us with the impression that the world around us is perfect...and we need to be as well.

The cosmetic industry reaps huge profits convincing people that physical perfection is but a product purchase away. Within the last few years, we’ve heard tales too numerous to count of talented athletes staking drugs in order to inch their competitive results towards perfection.

Sadly, it looks as though generations of children have been affected by it all. Young women suffer with more eating disorders than ever before. Steroid usage continues to inch higher and higher among high school athletes. There’s more pressure than ever academically. Parents spend billions of dollars a year pushing their children to be mini-Einsteins. Parental pressure on children to succeed is rampant– and by itself, pressure to be perfect is perceived by children as criticism for mistakes.

And perhaps it’s not just our children that are feeling the toll of striving for perfection. It’s us too!

So, how do we get there? What steps might we take? Better still, what does the Bible say about peace and how to attain it?

I turn now to our Scripture readings. I read first from Isaiah 11 and then from John 14. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

*“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*

I remember being in my aunt and uncle’s Episcopal church for my maternal Grandmother’s funeral. There, painted on a huge wall in their youth section was a giant mural. The letters declared, NO (no) Jesus, No peace. Know Jesus, know peace.

It’s the kind of slogan I wouldn’t normally attach to a liberal Protestant church any longer. After all, that kind of declarative statement runs afoul of current sensibilities and the headlong and destructive drive to universalism which has overtaken many within the church.

But I do believe it to be true.

Take for example something I read just yesterday. I don’t know if you know it yet but I am a bit of a World War II buff, particularly in Easy Company, that group of paratroopers made famous in the Band of Brothers series a decade or so back. The leader of Easy for much of their service was a man named Richard Winters. I read his autobiography yesterday. His reflections on peace were quite interesting.

Shortly after their 30-day shellacking in the Ardennes forest at Bastogne, Richard Winters got a 2 week pass. He headed back to England where he spent much of his precious leave going to church and reading the Bible. After undergoing a terrible time of war, Winters sought out the company of the Lord to soothe his troubles. He points out that, unlike other times reading the Bible or listening to sermons, he wasn’t trying to figure anything out. He just wanted to know more about the Lord.

Sometimes I do that, I confess it. Sometimes when I’m reading the Bible or listening to someone preach, I’ll be so fixated upon extracting meaning or figuring out the structure that I miss it. Miss the knowledge of the Lord. Miss Knowing Jesus (with a KN) and thus, miss the peace He brings us.

See, just knowing Jesus, I know a little something about myself. I a’int perfect, which may well be the understatement of the year, 2020-edition. You see, when I read the Gospels, I read about a man who was perfect. Faithfully attended to God’s Word, followed His directives. Even when pressed to do something He did not want to, Jesus response was telling. Mark 14:32-36 – **“And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled.<sup>34</sup> And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”**

Jesus, at the point of arrest and crucifixion remains faithful to His Father’s will. Sometimes I struggle with doing what God would have me do, even when it is far easier than this. I know I’m not perfect. And sometimes that causes me and others sleepless nights, no doubt.

But there is one who is perfect, that one is Jesus. May you find him now.

And it’s because Jesus is perfect that I can once again discover peace, even when I’ve failed. Because, you see, my relationship with God, my salvation even, was never about me. It was always about the nature of

God. To love. To forgive. To send the son into the world. John 3:17 – “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

So too does deep and abiding knowledge of Jesus allow me to be at peace in the world.

The world, at times, seems as though it’s gone haywire. While I by no means look to the past as being perfect, there were things that are now but distant memories which were FAR better than we’ve got today. As I said last week, sometimes technology blinds us to the fact that we’re becoming less civil, more divided, less forgiving even. I mean, a quick scan of Twitter demonstrates that even minor mistakes in language can lead to heaping thousands of Tweets filled with hate. Worse still, your minor infraction now carries with it the ultimacy and memory of the internet which, at this point, looks to be as enteral of this world.

But you see, when you KNOW JESUS, you can be at peace with others...even their mistakes.  
How?

Because you recognize that you yourself aren’t perfect and don’t expect others to come up to that impossible standard. Since you know your daily, ongoing need for God’s forgiveness, you, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are quick(er) to forgive others. Because you know Jesus, you know the Word in which Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6:14 – “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you...”. OR, again in Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Over and over and over again, the Bible reminds us to let go of past injuries. To live as forgiving people in the midst of an imperfect world. And it’s been my experience, that the more the Holy Spirit enables to let go of other people’s offenses, the more peaceful my mind becomes. IT’s almost as if, in forgiveness, you free up more of your mental energy to do more productive things than rehearse the injuries of the past whilst at the same time plotting some form of revenge. When we are enabled to let go of our resentments by God’s power, we live more peacefully in this world.

But, perhaps best of all, knowing Jesus means the gradual lessening of our fears. I know, this is a touchy subject in the era of COVID and if you hear this as some misguided advice not to take all the precautions available, you’re mishearing me.

Jesus tells us – Matthew 10:29-31 – “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

God values us. We’re His creation. While we’re here, He’s here with us.

And when our days are ended, because we KNOW Jesus, we know our eternal destination – the Kingdom of God.

But even better, we know a couple of things about that coming Kingdom.

First of all, who we are is who will be into eternity. John 10:27-28 – “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Jesus will never let us go. In life or in death.

Romans 14:8 – “For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Peace with God.

Peace within ourselves.

Peace with others.

Peace with eternity.

I’d say that’s all the peace we’re ever gonna need.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

### Scripture

**Isaiah 11:1-9** – “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

**John 14:25-27** – “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

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