

**Sermon: December 4, 2022 – The Sunday of Peace (Advent II) – Isaiah 11: 1-10
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Today, the second Sunday of Advent, is the Sunday of Peace.

So many things immediately come to mind on this topic of peace:

First: I am well aware of how easy it is for me to ponder peace from the safety of my mountain home, in comparison to those in Yemen, or Ukraine, or the Rohingya or the Uighurs. Peace at a philosophical or theological level is quite different from fearing for one's life. Violence, gunfire and rocket blasts are brutal, daily realities for a sizeable portion of the world's population, which confronts me with the truth that the need for peace is urgent, and not just conceptual.

Second: there are words that we have been gifted by the Rundle Memorial congregation in Banff, which accompanies the weekly lighting of the peace candle. Though our candle-lighting practices change substantially in Advent, for most of the year Rundle's Peace Candle is lit with these words:

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice. Peace is what happens when those who have much do not have too much, and those who have little do not have too little, when the very old and the very young are safe and secure, parents can feed their children and themselves, and all have the opportunity for meaningful work in their community. Let us pray and work for this kind of peace.

Third: In our "Contemplative Advent" practice this year, we are reminded that a significant part of going deep into the holy presence of God is the finding of inner peace. Inner peace, however, is not just about me and my well-being. If I am not at peace with myself, if deep-seated hurts or fears or self-loathing are actually guiding my choices, I will bring only a superficial sense of peace to my daily interactions; and if my interactions are not founded in peace, then how exactly do I expect that there will be peace in my community, or province, or nation? "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me" may sound trite, but there's a good deal of truth to those words.

So with all these swirling, semi-related thoughts arising, I realized that my task this morning was to find and share words from people who have addressed and lived a justice-based peace. The method, was to work from the Peace Candle liturgy at Rundle, and its wise words about the connection between peace, justice and equity as the basis of my search.

Not surprisingly, the first speaker who showed up in the search is Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was not the first to speak or write about peace not being the absence of war, but the presence of justice, but in a sermon preached in 1956 in Louisville, Kentucky, he spoke of what peace meant to him in light of the Montgomery Bus Protests that were happening at that time:

Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.

I had a long talk with a man the other day about this bus situation. He discussed the peace being destroyed in the community, the destroying of good race relations. I agree that it is more tension now. But peace is not merely the absence of this tension, but the

presence of justice. And even if we didn't have this tension, we still wouldn't have positive peace. Yes, it is true that if [our people] accepts [our] place, accept exploitation and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be a peace boiled down to stagnant complacency, deadening passivity, and if peace means this, I don't want peace.

- 1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.*
- 2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it.*
- 3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don't want peace.*
- 4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don't want peace. So in a passive, non-violent manner, we must revolt against this peace.*

Jesus says in substance, I will not be content until justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love, yes, the Kingdom of God are established upon the earth. This is real peace—a peace embodied with the presence of positive good. The inner peace that comes as a result of doing God's will.

Betty Williams was one of the two Northern Irish winners of the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize. Her speech at the presentation event affirms that the quest for peace is active, requires connection, and may appropriately include anger. In her speech she said this:

Mairead Corrigan and I knew "that unlocking the desire for peace would never have been enough. All the energy, all the determination to express an overwhelming demand for an end to the sickening cycle of useless violence, would have reverberated briefly and despairingly among the people, as had happened so many times before ... if we had not organized ourselves to use that energy and that determination positively, once and for all.

We are for life and creation, and we are against war and destruction, and in our rage... we screamed that the violence had to stop. But we also began to do something about it besides shouting....we announced the founding of the Movement of the Peace People, and we began planning a series of rallies which would last four months, and through which we would mobilize hundreds of thousands of people.

The words are simple but the path is not easy....It is a path on which we must not only reject the use of all the techniques of violence, but along which we must seek out the work of peace ... and do it. It is the way of dedication, hard work, and courage.

But I am also angry. I am as angry today, in a calm and a deep sense, at the wastage of human life that continues each day, as I was when I saw young life squashed on a Belfast street. I am angry, the Peace People are angry that war at home dribbles on, and around the world we see the same stupidity gathering momentum for far worse wars than the little one which the little population of Northern Ireland has had to endure. We are angry at the waste of resources that goes on every day for militarism while human beings live in misery.... We know that this insane and immoral imbalance of priorities cannot be changed overnight. We also know that it will not be changed without the greatest struggle.

Thirteen years later, another Nobel Peace Prize winner, the 14th Dalai Lama, touched on some of the connections between peace and poverty, justice and environmental justice, and lifted up peace-building as a spiritual exercise. In his Nobel speech he said,

Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold. It will not remove the pain of torture inflicted on a prisoner of conscience. It does not comfort those who have lost their loved ones in floods caused by senseless deforestation in a neighbouring country. Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.

Responsibility does not only lie with the leaders of our countries or with those who have been appointed or elected to do a particular job. It lies with each one of us individually. Peace, for example, starts with each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighbouring communities, and so on.

It would be disingenuous for Canadians to consider peace in 2022 without saying something about Ukraine. This fall, the World Council of Churches – of which The United Church of Canada is a member - held an assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. Rev Dr Catherine MacLean was one of our delegates. Powerfully, representatives from Ukraine and a delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church were both present. Following a series of statements denouncing the war itself and calling the perpetrators to stand down, then the WCC moved on to speak to the Church, which by extension includes this congregation. They wrote,

We call for a much greater investment by the governments of Europe and the entire international community...in strengthening non-violent conflict resolution, civil conflict transformation and reconciliation processes, rather than in escalating confrontation and division. We [also] call upon [ourselves] - the WCC, together with its member churches - to continue its approach of clarity and dialogue [so that we can] contribute to finding solutions to the conflict and its repercussions. We commit ourselves to holding one another accountable for maintaining the bond of unity in Christ.

Drawing upon the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in response to the question, "Who is my neighbour?", we...use our resources, our voices, and our sense of empathy to respond to the cries of all who call for healing and wholeness. We are strengthened for this ministry and witness by Jesus' teachings and example, recognizing that he himself experienced the necessity to flee from those who sought to kill Him, beginning at His birth. By Christ's command, we show compassion for all who seek refuge and asylum.

And finally, words of faith: our Scripture reading this morning, a treatise on a Messiah who will bring peace, from the book of Isaiah. Often understood by Christians as prefiguring the person of Jesus, and his ultimate return, these words speak of the deep yearning for peace in our Judaeo-Christian history, and give voice to our hopes of a new realm of peace, justice, equity and powerful love. Isaiah 11: 4-10, from THE VOICE translation:

Even those who can't afford a good defense will...get a fair and equitable judgment. With just a word, He will end wickedness and abolish oppression. With nothing more than the breath of His mouth, He will destroy evil. ⁵ He will clothe himself with righteousness and truth; the impulse to right wrongs will be in his blood.

⁶ A day will come when the wolf will live peacefully beside the wobbly-kneed lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; The calf and yearling, newborn and slow, will rest secure with the lion; and a little child will tend them all. ⁷ Bears will graze with the cows they used to attack; even their young will rest together, and the lion will eat hay, like gentle oxen. ⁸⁻⁹ Neither will a baby who plays next to a cobra's [den] nor a toddler who sticks his hand into a nest of vipers suffer harm.

All my holy mountain will be free of anything hurtful or destructive, for as the waters fill the sea, The entire earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Eternal. ¹⁰ Then on that day, that root from Jesse's line will stand as a signal for the peoples of the world Who will come to Him seeking guidance and direction; and glory will be restored to the land where He resides.

On this Sunday of Peace, may these words and the lives of those who have spoken them guide us, inspire us, lead us to the depth of into God's sacred presence, and cause us to reach out with all that we have, as those committed to a peace founded in Christ's own sense of justice, inclusion, and life. Amen.

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