

“Peace be with you! And also with you!” “Go in Peace, to love and serve the Lord.” Peace, is a word we use a lot in our worship services. Right in the middle of the service we have a time simply called “the Peace” where we greet one another with the Peace of Christ. Today, on this Second Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of peace, we were reminded that Jesus is the “Prince of Peace” foretold by the prophet Isaiah. In our readings from Baruch and the Song of Zechariah we heard this word, Peace again. Peace is important to our worship, it is important to our lives of faith. And yet so often “Peace” is furthest thing from our minds. In our own lives finding peace is difficult, whether it is conflicts with close friends or family members, or dealing with the stresses of work and the pressures of modern life. As a church community it can be hard to experience peace through change and transition or in a culture which often ignores and denigrates us. And finally as we look out upon the world we are inundated with images of violence and hatred. It seems like the last decades have been a punctuated by a litany of wars and terrorist attacks which seem to be reaching a crescendo with the horrific violence we witnessed only a few weeks ago in Iraq, Lebanon, France, Mali and Nigeria, on top of the dozens of ongoing conflicts throughout the world, too numerous to count here. Following the attacks in Paris, all we saw in our newspapers and on our television and computer screens for days were the chilling images of the aftermath of the attacks, images and stories of families trying to pick up broken pieces of their lives, men and women grieving the loss of their love, children struggling to learn life without a parent(s), and then we quickly saw and heard the vows of vengeance from politicians and military leaders across the western world and finally we witnessed the response of hatred throughout the world, as incidents of harassment and assault against Muslims skyrocketed across Europe and North America. Here in Canada there were reports of Muslim women being verbally and physically attacked, a mosque was burned in Peterborough and we saw repeated reactionary calls for the government to suspend the resettlement of refugees, out of fear that attacks like these could happen in our own country, our own cities and neighbourhoods. Peace isn’t just beyond our grasp, rather it seems that peace is impossible, that this world is destined for violence.

We’ve all probably longed for “world peace” before, growing up I always remember that whenever we were asked if there was one thing you’d wish for, inevitably someone in a group would say world peace. And yet despite all of our best intentions and wishes, our experiences of the world around us seem to suggest that peace is unattainable. And in a way it’s true. If we believe that peace is as simple as people quietly getting along, not disagreeing with one another and therefore not hurting one another, than there will never be peace. People are all different, people are going to disagree. If unity based on conformity is necessary for peace, then there will never truly be peace. I think that this simplistic, black and white vision is our culture’s understanding of peace, a peace that obliterates our differences, a peace which makes everyone the same, a peace that is really not peace at all.

But is this the Peace we hear that Jesus will usher in Zechariah’s song? Is this the peace that we share together each week? Is this the peace that is promised as we await the coming “Prince of Peace” this advent season?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” The Peace of God, the Peace which finds itself at the heart of God’s Story, is not the same feeble peace that the world gives, the same monochromatic living without disagreements, quietly getting along. The peace Jesus brings, is far more complicated than that. We celebrate the fact that this “Prince of Peace”, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, Jesus Christ was born a defenseless, innocent infant. We laud honour and glory upon this child whose parents were refugees fleeing from an evil tyrant desperate to hold on to power. We follow a teacher, a leader, who preached love for neighbour and enemy alike, who chose to make his place with the downtrodden and outcasts of society. This is what Jesus’ peace looks like. Finally on the Cross, we witness the peace of God. In the broken, pierced and humiliated Son of God, we witness what true peace looks like. On the Cross we witness God’s vision of Peace, we witness the reconciliation of all things to God. It is on the Cross that sinners are reconciled, it is on the Cross that the mortal is reconciled to the eternal, it is on the Cross where sworn enemies become brothers and sisters in the family of God. When we declare Jesus as the Prince of Peace, in Advent as we await the celebration of God dwelling among us as the fragile, innocent, peaceful child in the manger, we await none other than the Crucified one, the one who through his coming amongst us restores us to relationship with God.

As the Church when we speak of Peace, forgiveness and reconciliation are what we are speaking about, and not some state of quiet agreement. As the Church we know that, as the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin

Welby said “Genuine reconciliation is not only about agreement, but about how we love one another in deep disagreement.” Have you ever heard the term a “tense peace” to describe the situation between two warring parties? In one respect this is a great way of describing the peace of reconciliation, we are called to love one another even in the midst of disagreement. The Peace we experience is in diversity, it is in the diversity of all those who have experienced the reconciling love of God, in Jesus Christ incarnate and crucified. The peace we experience is in the choice to love in the face of hatred and violence, the choice to reconcile with one another even when it seems difficult, even when we believe strongly we are right and deserve restitution.

The Peace of Christ – incarnate, crucified and risen – is part of God’s story, it is part of what it means for us to live out the Story of God, to live out the Gospel in our daily lives, each and every day. One of the most compelling stories for me that came out of the horrible violence in Paris was the response of one man, Antoine Leiris – whose wife Helene Moyal-Leiris was killed in the attacks on the Bataclan theatre. Following the attacks he wrote an open letter to the terrorists, defying their indiscriminate hatred. In his letter Mr. Leiris wrote:

“On Friday night you stole the life of an exceptional being, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you won’t have my hatred... If this God for which you kill indiscriminately made us in his own image, every bullet in the body of my wife will have been a wound in his heart. So no, I don’t give you the gift of hating you. You are asking for it but responding to hatred with anger would be giving in to the same ignorance that made you what you are. You want me to be afraid, to view my fellow countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my freedom for security... Of course I’m devastated with grief, I admit this small victory, but it will be short-lived. I know she will accompany us every day... We are two, my son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies of the world. I don’t have any more time to devote to you, I have to join Melvil who is waking up from his nap. He is barely 17-months-old. He will eat his meals as usual, and then we are going to play as usual, and for his whole life this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free. Because no, you will not have his hatred either.”

While his tone is perhaps confrontational, his message highlights how we as Christians should live out the Peace of God in our lives. Instead of responding with hatred Mr. Leiris responded with love for his son, it redoubled his commitment to trust his fellow countrymen and he even refused to devote hatred to the perpetrators. Too often we respond to hatred with more hatred, we respond to hatred and violence in fear and anger. As Christians we are called to seek reconciliation, we are called to respond to hatred with grace, love and mercy. When faced with situations that might cause us grief, hardship or pain: do not allow them to divide you from other people, do not allow them to respond in hatred and anger. In response to the senseless violence, we cannot as Christians respond by committing violence against anyone – either actual violence or even by our thoughts – especially against groups of people that have nothing to do with the attacks. We cannot allow the love of Christ to turn to hatred for Muslims here in Canada, or for Syrian refugees fleeing for their safety. If we do, then we are not living the Peace of God.

This isn’t easy, I’m not going to sugar coat it, it is a hard task to live into the Peace of Christ; it is particularly hard to live into it with our enemies. We will falter, we will fall down, we will succumb to anger, we will succumb to sin. The Good News is that God’s Story doesn’t end there, and neither does our part in it. Each time we stumble, Jesus picks up and invites us to experience the reconciliation of the Cross once again; each time we succumb to sin and anger the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to return to the Peace of Christ. Every time we lose our place in the Story of God, he invites us to immerse ourselves once more in His tale of cosmic reconciliation and restoration.

As we practice peace in our lives, as we exercise the peace that Jesus gives us, just like when muscles get stronger lifting weights, so too do our lives of disciples become more firmly rooted in God’s Story of Peace. Each and every week we get a small, simple, but powerful opportunity to exercise the Peace of God: when we share the Peace. We get a chance to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in Christ who we have conflicts with, we get to seek and extend forgiveness so that we might come to the Lord’s Table united in our diversity, gathered in love despite our disagreements. In this we get a foretaste, here and now, of the everlasting Peace of Christ. Thanks be to God!