

Romans 5:1-5
Isaiah 53:1-5

Dec. 10, 2017

Advent "Hope"
Peace And Perseverance

The hope of the Christmas season is a hope for peace. Most everyone we know wants peace. No one's against peace. They desire peace in their lives, peace around them, and peace far away. Isn't that the way for you? Don't you want peace in your home, peace in your workplace, peace in your neighborhood and community? Who doesn't want peace in their nation and around the world?

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,"

Romans 12:18. Would that we could easily live that way.

But peace means different things to different people. People say they want "peace" when there's a loud party going on next door and they're trying to sleep. But they really want quiet. People say they want "peace" when they're worried about all the bills they have to pay. But they really want "prosperity." People say they want "peace" as they wait for the results of their medical tests. But really, they want good health.

"Peace" is what we think we need when we don't have what we want.

Unfortunately, when the next set of challenges appear that kind of peace tends to evaporate. Even more, one person's "peace" may well be another person's problems. Is there a peace that works for everyone? True peace is not simply the absence of what's wrong, but the presence of what's right.

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible contains hundreds of references to peace: among people, among nations, and with God. In fact, the peace the Bible talks about begins when people recover peace with God; and God has provided the way. How ironic that the only real hope for peace in the Middle East was born there 2,000 years ago. God's peace is a peace that passes all understanding.

Peace Beyond Comprehension

Recall last week's message. I talked about how at the moment that creation came out of the hands of God, the Lord said, *"This is good..."* There was perfect harmony and peace among all. But the man and the woman decided they could define good and evil themselves, apart from God. That's when ***sin entered the world – humans putting themselves in God's place.*** The result was a "fall" from the perfection God had designed, and humans have been in contention with God and one another ever since. Some have likened it to war between humans and their Creator. There is no peace.

It is no surprise then, that war is the natural human state; that contention, strife, and friction color all human relations. These problems are the fruit of a

human nature at war with God. Last week I sketched the origin of humanity's problems and the rescue plan God set in motion to redeem us from our messes.

The O. T. prophets spoke of a time to come when the goodness of God's creation would be restored and there would be peace, though an unnatural kind of peace ... actually a supernatural kind of peace. *"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them"* Isaiah 11:6.

Then God's most decisive action to rescue us from sin came at Christmas. The One who can bring supernatural peace was born into our strife-torn, and war-wracked world, just as had been predicted. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,"* Isaiah 9:6.

So how does this Savior bring peace? Again the prophet foretold it: *"... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed,"* Isaiah 53:5. We humans, on our own, by ourselves, cannot produce our own good, our own contentment, our own peace with our Maker. Oh, sure some do a fair job of it; they, work hard, look successful, but they can't run away from sin. Recent news shows us such – oh how the mighty have fallen. Others flit about, unable to land anywhere. Just here our Savior brings a peace that is deeper than even our minds can comprehend, a peace not readily known to humankind. Jesus said, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives,"* John 14:27.

He brings us peace with God by destroying our sinfulness on the Cross: *the punishment that brought us peace was on him.* That's the source of true and lasting peace. If you have peace with God you'll be able to have peace with people.

Are you at peace with God? I mean, really have you concisely realized that indeed you are separated from your Creator and that's why you can't find true peace? Has the Prince of Peace entered your home, your workplace, and elsewhere? If He is absent from those places most likely it is because we failed to bring Him in. Maybe we find it hard ... because finding true peace involves two things that most people shy away from: Repentance and Perseverance.

Peace in Repentance

No amount of extra effort will help a runner win the race if he's running in the wrong direction. The next step necessary for God's solution to our sin problem is repentance. The first step toward peace is a confession that we have a genuine need; that we're separated from God by sin and need His forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ. Until we admit that, we'll never find deep and lasting peace.

I've been around long enough to tell you there's always something missing. We're well aware of the world's problems, plus all the messed up lives, broken marriages, broken families, including our own hidden weaknesses or excesses. This brokenness is in the church as well. The challenges, problems, obstacles are sometimes circumstances and sometimes they're people. Financial and economic distress weigh heavily on some; health concerns, interpersonal relations, disagreements with others. If we continue to try to work out our lives as though God had no part to play, as though He couldn't or wouldn't help us, then He won't.

Repentance translates a Hebrew word meaning "return." It means to turn to God; and the necessary corollary is to turn away from whatever takes you away from God. Which way are you headed in your life? It seems that though Christ defeated sin's hold on us, we are still tempted to turn away from God – and temptation knocks on our doors every day! Will you open the door or turn to God?

Peace Fosters Perseverance

I wonder if technology has conditioned us to expect faster and faster results with everything. We expect the good things of life to come our way immediately. Is there a growing impatience with striving for long-term results? Yet God's plan for us is set in His time frame. What's God's time frame? Eternity! **God's work in us is a long-term job. It may take most of us most of our lifetimes to be transformed into the image of Christ. Yet we can see the results accumulate if we are diligent and pay attention.**

When we realize God's grace for our sinful lives, then we'll begin to have more grace for people. When we find peace with God, through Jesus, we'll begin to have more peace with people. That doesn't mean, however, that all troubles and conflicts magically disappear. I'm sure we'll continue to face conflicts of values, of power, and personality. That is just part of our fallen nature. We'll continue to struggle with our own sin as we seek to be transformed from our fallen nature into our new spiritual nature through Jesus Christ. What we'll need in this endeavor is perseverance.

Perseverance produces character, and character, hope. This is not to say that if we just grit our teeth, "get over it," that everything will turn out fine. Rather, it is to say that starting with the assurance of God's favor, God's powerful love for us that won't let us go, we are able to endure all challenges, all obstacles, all delays, to realize His purposes in us.

Two weeks ago I said, "We know that in His first coming He defeated sin and death on the cross; yes! And yet, ever since, we look for the day when we '*...will see the Son of Man coming in clouds, with great power and glory.*' We still yearn for the day when He will *forever* put away sin and death and all its consequences. When is that day? And He answers, "*Therefore keep watch*

because you do not know when...” So what are we supposed to do in the meantime?¹

1) Keep the faith. That means turning to God even in times of drought, even when the fruit has not yet appeared. If we detach from Him, we’ll never enjoy the fruit. This means holding fast to God’s promises; noticing where God has blessed us. In the “daily-ness” of our living, faith grows by prayer and noticing where God is at work.

The “daily-ness” of living is made purposeful by rereading the stories of faith in the Bible so that *our* faith is nourished. Once upon a time all the villagers decided to pray for rain. On the day of prayer all the people gathered, but only one boy came with an umbrella. That’s FAITH.

Faithfulness doesn’t mean just keeping the pew warm. It **means keeping your spirit warm by following Christ in all weather.** Diligence is its brother; dependability, its partner; discipline, its parent. True faithfulness is precious because it produces so much good fruit. Convenience says, “When I feel good then I’ll do it.” Faithfulness says, “When I do it, I’ll feel good.”

2) Celebrate His Presence Just because Jesus has yet to return to complete it all, it does not follow that he should be absent from what we do now. Didn’t he say, **“... surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt.28:20)?** Take heart, Christ isn’t idle until he returns, neither should we be idle. Why did he say things like, *“The kingdom is among you?”* Or, *“Go out into this world and preach; baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit?”* He gave us things to do. When he broke his bread and shared his wine in that upper room he told his followers to share like that all through the world in remembrance of Him.

It’s not like we’re sitting in a concert hall, casually passing the time until the house lights are lowered and the conductor takes the stage. It is more like waiting for an honored guest to arrive at our home. There is much to do; everything must be made ready. Keep watching for Christ’s arrival, sure; but don’t stop working, says Paul. **“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right; for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up”** Galatians 6:9. **Be about preparation, not passivity.** Perseverance means keeping the faith in Him and His promises and also keeping on the tasks He’s given us to do. There is a peace in trusting that God has saved you from the ravages of sin and given you a purpose. **“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world,”** John 16:33.

To live in hopeful expectation of Christ appearing does not mean that we give up on the present world, in such a mess as it is. On the contrary, Christians partner with God to rid the world of its messes because we know that the same

¹Some ideas adapted from Robert S. Crilley, “Just You Wait!” *Sermons On The Second Readings, Series I, Cycle C*, First Sunday of Advent.

One who will finally vanquish the powers of darkness at the end of time, is already moving in mighty strength against them even now.

Hope in God's Possibilities

I read of a rather intriguing statistic the other day. In the game of chess, after each person has made one move, there are roughly 400 possibilities for the next move. After a player has moved twice, there are over 70,000 possibilities. With three moves, the number increases to more than nine million. That surprised me, because I would have thought it to be just the opposite.

No one can be sure when Christ will return. In the meantime He has told us to pay attention. Keep working, and praying, and serving, and loving one another and see what God is able to do (see Matt. 24). Who knows? Maybe the more we do, the greater the possibilities that God is able to do something through us.

So let us not grow weary in seeking Him. There is peace in persevering as a disciple of Christ and you can have it today. *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus," Phil. 4:7.* His peace transcends all situations of life, endures for all time, because it comes from God's all-powerful, transcendent presence. And there is hope in that!

***"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope"* Romans 15:13.**