

December 8, 2024
Rev. Lisa Schrott
From the Manger: Hungering for Peace
Isaiah 11:1-10 & Luke 2:1-14

The words from the prophet Isaiah which Rebecca just shared are some of the most poetic words in scripture. They tell of a world where peace reigns - where there will be no hurt or destruction for the “for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” And a little child shall lead them. Hear now the fulfillment of that prophecy from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

“Christmas celebrations have been canceled in Bethlehem” read the teaser tucked at the bottom of the “In Other News” section of the daily email I receive from the magazine *Christianity Today*. The link took me to an article in Reuters titled “Another bleak Christmas in Bethlehem as Christian families quit West Bank.” The article shares that “For a second year running, there is no Christmas cheer in Bethlehem, with tourists shunning the Palestinian city and many residents seeking a way out as the Gaza war grinds on. Bethlehem's Manger Square in front of the Church of the Nativity is largely deserted and souvenir shops are shuttered. Once again, there are no plans to put up the traditional light-festooned Christmas

Tree in the ancient settlement that is venerated by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus and now sits in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.”¹

My initial emotional response was sadness, with a tinge of anger, for I love decorating for Christmas. I love all of the festivities from the feel-good Hallmark movies to the struggle to get the fresh cut Christmas tree into the stand that I swear shrinks every year to the elaborate train platform and snow village that houses the 1940’s locomotive passed on from my grandfather to my dad to me.

As Brian and I spent much of the week decorating, and as I appreciate the lights and music that surround us everywhere this season, the article gave me some pause. If Bethlehem is not decorating for the holiday, what does that mean? Am I hungering for hope and peace and joy and love in the sparkle and twinkle and nostalgia of Christmas? Or am I hungering for peace “from the manger”? Am I hungering for Christmas or am I hungering for Christ?

As I have been reading and contemplating Advent and Christmas this year, I recognize just how far we have drifted from “the manger” in the ways we celebrate the birth of Christ.

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The first Advent began in darkness and danger. It came after centuries of fighting; after generations of the Hebrew people lived under one empire after another. Some empires, like the Persians, were generally benevolent, allowing the Hebrew people to continue their religious practices. Other rulers, like Alexander the Great, encouraged the Israelites to adopt the culture and lifestyle of their Greek occupiers. This “Hellenization” of the Jewish people led to diminishing of Temple worship and following of Jewish dietary customs. Greek became the common language of the region and what we know as the Old Testament scriptures were translated into Greek, so fewer people read the scriptures in the original Hebrew.

If this diminishing of the religious practices of the Jewish people through the influence of Greek culture wasn’t bad enough, some of the occupying rulers, like the Seleucids, went even farther. Around 160 years before Jesus’ birth, Antiochus Epiphanes removed the Hebrew priests from their Temple duties, and then further desecrated the Temple, turning it into a pagan altar and defiling it by sacrificing unclean animals on it. Armed resistance to the Seleucids occurred, primarily through one family - the Hasmoneans, a family of priests and rebels. Eventually, Jewish resistance to Antiochus, led by Judas Maccabeus, restored the rightful priests and rescued the Temple. Even though the Jewish resistance was successful,

¹ Mustafa Abu Ganeyeh. Another bleak Christmas in Bethlehem as Christian families quit West Bank. Reuters. December 1, 2024. Online at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/another-bleak-christmas-bethlehem-christian-families-quit-west-bank-2024-12-01/>

this period of Jewish history, recorded in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha, was incredibly violent and about as far from peaceful as one could imagine.² Is it any wonder that the Jewish people at the time of Christ's birth were hungering for peace? Hungering for a time when they could worship God without threats or fears or taking up arms against an occupying force?

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Caesar Augustus? How did we get from the Jewish Revolt during the Seleucids to Caesar Augustus? Well around 63 BCE, Pompey of Rome conquered Israel, putting all of Hebrew territories under Roman control. The Roman emperor named Herod the king of Judea. And the Roman empire became the ones taxing and controlling the fate of the Hebrew people. They became the ones maintaining the "pax" or peace, or so it appeared.

As the authors of our *From the Manager* commentary note: "Several Roman emperors circulated coins with images of Pax, the goddess of peace, or simply the inscription "Pax." In Rome, a monument was built to celebrate Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire, called the Ara Pacis Augustae, meaning "Altar of Augustan Peace." Augustus was worshipped as a savior who brought peace after many years of war. So, for many under this imperial rule, peace was top-down, led by a powerful individual like an emperor."³

This is what peace meant to the Romans— the absence of war because of the fears instilled by the iron-grip of emperor. It was an oppressive peace... a peace based on hierarchy with everyone knowing and staying in their place. Is this the kind of peace the people of Israel were hungering for? "Into this world, Luke places peace among the shepherds, among ordinary people. For Luke, peace is realized not by the power of a single individual, but through a collective, bottom-up effort."

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and

² This sections draws heavily from Chinku Rai. *The InterTestamental Period*. Available online at https://www.academia.edu/96746096/The_InterTestamental_Period?email_work_card=view-paper

³ Illustrated Ministry. *From the Manager. Peace. Liturgy and Commentary*. <https://store.illustratedministry.com/collections/from-the-manger>

saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Or in the words of the spiritual "Go Tell it on the Mountain" that the handbell choir played this
The shepherds feared and trembled, When, lo! Above the Earth
Rang out the angel chorus, That hailed our Savior's birth
Go, tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain, That Jesus Christ is born

To the shepherds, who were at the bottom rung of society, the angels brought good news of a different kind of peace than what the Romans were offering. For all of those in that era and all of us today who are hungering peace, the angels promised the "prince of peace." – from the royal lineage of David comes a new kind of king. A king who is born of humble human birth in a manger. A king who ushers in a vision where the poor in spirit receive the kingdom of God, where the meek inherit the land, and the peacemakers are called children of God.

This promise of peace has deep roots in our scripture, for our ancestors hungered for peace. They hungered for shalom - God's basic intention for humanity – that all people live in a condition of wholeness and completeness, of wellness and harmony, of integration and balance. Shalom is at the root of our personal relationships and shalom is also at the root of our systemic relationships, and is a foundational principle in biblical justice.

Jesus tells us in the gospel of John: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." The peace that Jesus leaves us with is not simply the absence of war. It is this sense of completeness and harmony for all people. I cannot have shalom, if you do not have shalom.

Yesterday afternoon the confirmation class and their mentors visited the Islamic Center of Greater Lansing and heard a beautiful presentation by Imam Sohail Chaudhry about the place of Jesus and his mother Mary in Islam. It was a reminder of how connected we are through the one whom the angels declared "will bring peace -shalom - salaam on earth."

What are we hungering for this Advent? Is it simply the absence of war? Or are we hungering for more? For wholeness and completeness and wellness for all people? May we realize our hungers for peace may be dampened by the sparkle and twinkle and nostalgia of Christmas. But our hunger for peace will only be satisfied "from the manger", in the child wrapped in bands of cloth, of whom the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!". Amen.