



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Peace, Justice, Joy, and Salvation: An Adult Advent Study

The Gift of Peace: Swords into Plowshares

Introduction

One of the most cherished traditions of Christmas is gift giving. Many people spend weeks, even months, planning, purchasing, wrapping, and shipping gifts to family and friends. Many shops and stores depend on the Christmas season for a majority of their annual sales. Most of us train our children from an early age to anticipate what they will get for Christmas. Sometimes, our gift giving can become overwhelming, but at its core, this practice brings us much joy.

The custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas seems to stem from the story of the magi who came to visit Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. They came bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Their generosity doubtless sustained the family during their exile in Egypt, while they waited for the murderous King Herod to die. The visit of the magi is traditionally celebrated on Epiphany, January 6, and in many countries, that is the day that gifts are exchanged. For many, our giving has its roots in this part of the Christmas story.

This study suggests that we consider not the gifts we give but rather the gifts we receive. Christmas is, after

all, the birth of Immanuel, God with us. At Christmas, we celebrate the greatest of God's gifts. From the very beginning, Christians have found in the prophet Isaiah words that helped them express the mystery and meaning of Jesus. Over the next four weeks, we will consider familiar texts through the lens of gifts. Embedded in these texts are gifts that God longs to give us and deeply desires for us to receive into our lives: peace, justice, joy, and salvation. These gifts are nothing short of transformative. If we receive them, they will re-form us into what we were intended to be from the beginning: reflections of God's own being.

Focus Text: Isaiah 2:1–5

Periodically, my local NPR station runs a commercial promoting its sibling station that plays classical music. The announcer asks if you are feeling stressed about your day or your commute. He suggests that peace is only as far away as changing the station, which is followed by a few seconds of very soothing music. This is a rather simplistic understanding of the usually European and American music that we call "classical," but it is true that much in that tradition can take us to a place of calm because of the sheer beauty of the sounds.

What is it that you think of when you hear the word *peace*? This commercial suggests that the peace we seek is tranquility amid the busyness of everyday life; a place of calm in the face of the pressures that often come at us from multiple directions; an oasis where we can rest and regroup. Those are all good meanings for peace. But surely there is more. You may also think of peace as the opposite of violence or the cessation of warfare. Peace is when people are not killing each other. Many of us don't see violence like this in person, but we know that it is happening in our cities and around the world. And yet, isn't there more to peace even than that?

This First Sunday of Advent, we reflect on the gift of peace: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4). People will no longer learn how to kill each other. We will not study battle plans or design evermore deadly weapons. We will no longer need to use violence to settle our disputes. That is the vision that God gave Isaiah and that Isaiah in turn gives to us.

Like all prophetic texts, these beautiful words have a context. The time is the middle of the eighth century before the Common Era. The kingdom of Judah headquartered in Jerusalem is caught in a Middle East power struggle between the Assyrian empire to the north and the Egyptians to the south. The king is tempted to join an alliance against the Assyrians. Isaiah argues against this, saying that it is foolhardy for the king to trust in military options rather than trusting in God. That said, Isaiah also sees that things in Jerusalem are deeply wrong and that God's protection of the nation depends, at least in part, on reform. Here is some of what's wrong: "Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them" (Isa. 1:23). And again: "Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasurers; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands" (2:7–8). Corruption, excessive wealth, trust in military might, idolatry (that is, trusting in something that is not God): the nation of Judah is in danger from without, but it is also threatened from within. Isaiah hopes to inspire

the people to trust in God and to reform their ways. He does this by offering them the vision of everlasting peace.

Meanings of Peace

Peace is such a powerful concept. Perhaps because it is so important to our well-being and because it is so illusive, peace exerts a powerful tug on our spiritual imagination. And it is at the heart of the biblical story. When the angels announce the good news of Christ's birth, this is their song: "Peace on earth; good will to all." When the risen Christ greets his grieving and terrified disciples, he says (over and over again): "Peace be with you." Most of Paul's letters begin and end with greetings like this: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7). Both in Hebrew and Arabic, the standard way of saying hello and goodbye is the same: "Shalom. Salaam." Peace—peace be with you; peace be upon you; I wish you peace.

Peace is far more than the absence of conflict. It is deeper even than inner calm. Peace is fundamentally about harmony between people. It is human life lived in community when people get along with one another and where life flourishes as a result. Living at peace with one another and with nature is how we were created or intended to live. Genesis paints a picture of the first humans being given a garden to care for and cultivate. All the animals are brought to the human who gives them names. They are to live together in harmony and peace. And they do, until the humans break the peace by challenging the boundaries.

We will no longer need to use violence to settle our disputes.

The purpose of the law given to Israel was to show God's people how to live at peace with one another. Think about the Ten Commandments, especially what is often called the "second tablet" of the law. People are to honor and respect their parents and, by extension, those in authority. They are to respect one another by preserving life, honoring marriage covenants, respecting other people's property, and telling the truth to and about each other. The law, even when stated as what we are *not* to do, has embedded in it a picture of a society

where there is peace among neighbors based on mutual respect, protection, and care.

Making Peace

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said, for they indeed will be called the children of God. Peace is not only a state of being but also something we need to be doing. Turns out this is hard work, however. In order to live at peace, you have to be a peacemaker. This means I have to look not only to my own needs but also to the needs of others. In order to flourish, I cannot be the center of my own universe; there must be room for you. Your concerns, your deep needs, your hurts and fears and hopes must become as important to me as my own. To be at peace is to live in a “commonwealth,” that is, a society committed to the common “weal” or well-being of all.

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Sadly, we know that all too often this is not the way of things. Violence has rarely been absent from American life, but it seems to have invaded spaces we once thought of as “off limits”—like public schools, grocery stores, movie theaters, and churches. Violence has become part of the way we talk to one another. We do not disagree with others; we dismiss and demean others by calling them names. And the greatest temptation in times like these is to become resigned to the status quo. We are tempted to believe that no one can do anything to change things as they are, that our institutions and our leaders will not or cannot bring us back to the path of goodwill.

There is no magic cure for our dis-ease; there is no off-the-shelf remedy for resignation or despair.

But there is a vision. There are ancient words given birth in dark and dangerous times. The prophet Isaiah knew that his nation, Judah, and his city, Jerusalem, were in deep trouble because of their failure to follow God’s path of justice and peace. But the vision he held out was of his city restored. Notice how expansive the vision is. Isaiah looks beyond restoring the nation of Israel. One day, he says, all nations will come to the mountain of God (that is, to the temple in Jerusalem). People from all over the earth will come to study God’s ways. They will want to reform and reshape their lives according to God’s teaching. “Out of Zion shall go forth instruction,” Isaiah says (2:3). And what will be the curriculum? It will be peace. The nations of the world will not “learn war any more” (v. 4). Weapons of war will be transformed into agricultural tools. Implements of death become tools for cultivating the

earth and growing food. The culture of death will be reshaped into the culture of life. So promise gives birth to imperative. Come, Isaiah says to his people, let us *walk* in the light of the Lord! One foot in front of the other on the path of peace.

Holding onto this vision is tricky. Not only are we to trust in God, who plants this holy idea of peace in our hearts, but we also have to stay awake and watch for the signs that God is at work in our lives. We must not give in to the ordinary—eating and drinking, going to work or school, living our daily lives. If we are to live into God’s peace, we must be alert to its signs and ready to open the door when love comes knocking. This is God’s gift: that we will welcome into our hearts the one called “Prince of Peace.”

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