

## Making Room for Peace

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### **Intro:**

The question we are asking ourselves at Advent is:  
If God came to see you today, would you notice his coming?  
Is your heart in a place ready to receive him? Is your lamp light on in expectation? The seat made ready? Has the tea been poured?

Our theme is 'Making room...'. Over the four weeks we are exploring and making room in our lives for Hope, Peace, Joy, Love.

**Hope, peace, joy and love** are the lenses needed for our eyes to see God's coming.

This will mean some slowing down, some tidying up may be required in our lives, some self reflection, letting God sift through our goals and dreams, so that we can listen and wait in expectation for God's coming.

Today we are making room for peace.

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem which we now know as the carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." This carol was written on Christmas Day, 1863, when the American Civil War was at its height. Longfellow was saddened by the horrors of this drawn-out conflict, for "hate seemed overstrong at the moment", as he put it. And Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had even more reason to be tied up in knots because he had got word that His son, who was serving as lieutenant in the Union Army at the time, had been wounded. On this not so merry Christmas, Longfellow heard Christmas bells chiming out over the town, with their sweet celebratory melodies, from the cathedral nearby, and he suddenly came to a great realisation. He realised that God IS right there with them, despite everything, and God is powerful enough to overcome the world's strife, and to bring peace and good will to Earth. So he sat down and wrote this carol. Let me read the whole poem to you, including verses that are now generally omitted:

**Read: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day (see last page)**

The standout image from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's carol is of God's loving presence being like a continuous bell song constantly resounding in our ears to remind us that God is for us and He is with us in all we do. Longfellow is saying to us: 'God's peace is available, we just need to tune in to the glorious melody. So even when the busyness of life and the conflicts and issues that inevitably come, seem to be drowning out this salvation song, this song can nevertheless still be heard if you listen in.

I love this picture and I want to show you that this message lies at the heart of the Christmas celebration:

Be at peace! God is here with us – don't you recognise Him?!

But there is a hiddenness to God's peace. The challenge is how do we tune our lives in to receive God's peace and wholeness? How do we hold onto God's peace even in the middle of trouble?

The Christmas story speaks directly into this: it is told in both Luke and Matthew's gospels from a perspective of God fulfilling old promises. We are told this story from God's big picture, we can see God orchestrating things. And it is an inspiring story because we know who Jesus is, even though the characters in the story often don't. We know that God is coming in Him to be with us, to show his extravagant love for us, to guide us and teach us, to heal us, to save us.

But I want us today to imagine it through Joseph's eyes:

For Joseph, it mustn't have been so easy to see God in the picture. His year so far had definitely already felt like one he wanted to put behind him. First he received the troubling news that his fiancée, Mary, who seemed honest and upright, had fallen pregnant. Working through the pain and rejection of this news, he makes the decision to quietly break off the engagement. But then, an angel scares him half to death and tells him that somehow Mary's child is from God. You could just imagine the confusion and bewilderment in his mind. But going on the angel's word, Joseph chooses to stick by Mary. You can just imagine the rumours going around town at the time, which may not have been too kind towards Joseph. Surely Joseph would be wondering 'where are you in this, God?' Then just at this time, of all

times, the emperor calls a census, ordering everyone back to their hometowns when Mary is not far off the birth date. What are you doing, God? Are you really in control? Then when they finally arrive at Bethlehem, after an arduous journey there's no room for them to stay. What are you doing, God? Can't you give me a break just once? Then Mary goes into labour and she gives birth in a stable behind a hotel. Are you even there, God? If that wasn't hard enough, King Herod and his henchmen create terror and mayhem killing baby boys in the region, forcing Joseph to leave in the night, escaping to a foreign land and go through all the challenges of settling there until the threat has passed.

How long do you think it took Joseph to realise that in all these trials of this extremely disrupting and difficult year, where his own plans had been thrown to the wind and things completely outside his control, that God was indeed at work to fulfil age-old promises in a most wonderful way. Maybe it was when a rag-tag bunch of shepherds turned up claiming to have heard a great heavenly choir of angels rip the sky open with their songs of God's glory and peace to all men and women on earth who please him. Or perhaps when noble wise men from afar bowed before his child with expensive gifts. Or perhaps it took a much longer time... And I wouldn't blame Joseph because we are all slow on the uptake when it comes to recognising God's peace-bringing presence. We too struggle to see God in the picture.

**What are the factors in your life that get in the way of God's peace?**

- Busyness, hard-heartedness, grief, despair

**1. Peace comes when we trust in the goodness of God.**

His goodness brings spiritual strength and security. No one can experience this deep inner peace unless it rests ultimately in the goodness of God.

The root of anxiety is the suspicion that God is not good.

If we believe that God is good only when things go our way, then when things don't go our way or God doesn't give us the answer to our prayers as we desire, we will not live in his peace.

Peace begins in this relational place of trust with God.

## **2. Trusting in God's peace moves us towards peacemaking.**

As we recognise this, instead of praying 'God get me out of this' we can find the faith to ask:

What is God doing in the midst of this trouble? How is he preparing me? How is this working towards his goodness being shown?

The paradox of the Christmas story for Joseph is that while the ordinary normal trials of this ordinary everyday man placed him in vulnerable places of hardship, it is right there in those hard times that the most wonderful miracle of Christ's coming to dwell among his creatures is realised. Right there, even in the turmoil and messiness of it all, there is God's peace, God with us, for all to see.

Always wanting to escape to a tropical island paradise:

Peace is found in engaging in life's challenges, not in disengaging.

- not attempting to 'rise above' the everyday.

Our intimacy with God is spoiled by the expectation that life should always be wonderful.

We're not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us, we are just wondering how painful his best will turn out to be. C. S. Lewis

Then we can take first steps towards peacemaking:

- develop a stance of non-violence
  - respect and reverence for one another
- become a nurturing presence
  - realise how fragile and delicate we all are
- heightened response to suffering
  - sensitivity to the preciousness of people

But how do we not get overwhelmed in the struggle?

### **3. Peace is less about getting the outcome we want, it is more about surrendering to what God is doing.**

Trust in God's goodness leads to an inner peace that is not dependant on the outcome of what we are doing.

George Henry Morling - 1921 - 1960. Principal NSW Baptist College:

Instead of praying in times of stress 'Lord, keep me calm", pray, 'Lord, entrench me in your calm'. Instead of praying 'make me strong' pray 'My weakness abandoned and your strength, a strength tested and triumphant in like circumstances, allowed to express itself through my surrendered personality.

This opens us up to a new world of possibility.

2 Cor 5:17

'If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, old things have passed away, behold all things are becoming new.'

John 16:33

I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

May we recognise that God is present in the hustle bustle and the hum drum of our everyday lives. His salvation song plays, offering peace and assurance of his ongoing presence. The message of Christmas is that God is deeply involved with us – God loves us dearly and is here with us.

Be on the look out this week, listen for the bells, remember Joseph, so that, even in your hardships, especially in your hardships, you just might encounter God's peace.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet, The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along, The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime, A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound, The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn, The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said:  
"For hate is strong, And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!  
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"