

Psalm 85:8-13 NRSVUE

- ⁸Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
¹²The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
¹³Righteousness will go before him
and will make a path for his steps.

Romans 12:9-18 NRSVUE Marks of the True Christian

- ⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good;
¹⁰love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.
¹¹Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord.
¹²Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.
¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.
¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.
¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant,
but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.
¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

This is the Word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God!

This Advent preaching series we're challenging ourselves to put at the top of our Christmas lists the Life-Giving gifts of Hope, Peace, Joy & Love. Gifts that are not as tangible as the Play Station 5, or the new iPhone 16 or a Prada designer bag. NO...BUT they are gifts that if claimed & opened can bring life-giving transformation that will last beyond any warranty or wear and tear of those other gifts.

Just last week Jeremiah talked about the gift of Hope that comes most often the hard way in our lives, trusting that God is with us every step of the way. Indeed our faith is what keeps us rooted in Christ no matter what. That's Life Giving Hope!

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent we focus upon unwrapping life-Giving Peace in all aspects of our lives—Peace within ourself, within our family, our friendships, Peace at our workplace & the church, Peace for our nation & for the world. Peace is a Life-Giving Gift...one that can be given and one that can be received.

Throughout the holiday season, we can become so unsettled over things. the hustle & bustle of Christmas often wreaks havoc with our lives—physically, emotionally, financially, relationally and spiritually. Our normal routines are bumped by the “have to’s” of the holidays:

- I “have to” go to the work party.
- I have to buy more presents.
- Oh man, this year I have to host the family Christmas party.
- Of course...I have to decorate the house.
- And well...I have to bake cookies.
- Now I have to buy new clothes because of all the parties & food!

All the “have to’s” of the season put our normal routines out of whack and we may feel our lives are getting a bit out of control. So Peace throughout the Advent season is sometimes hard to find. And we all know that the changes soon to come in our national landscape continue to impact so many in our country...impact so many right here...leaving many feeling restless and anxious...aching for that peace that surpasses understanding PEACE that brings contentment, stability and strength.

Far too often we seek and rely upon only material things to bring us peace, BUT this is not the same as seeking the Life-Giving gift that is offered through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. So what is peace...and how can we open this Life-Giving package this December?

I discovered in my research for this week’s message a NYC visual artist



named Franck de Las Mercedes who actually makes, and sends peace packages every year around the world. He and his wife send small boxes with abstract designs on the outside to anyone, anywhere in the world for free. Pasted under the address is a label that reads, “FRAGILE. Handle with Care. Contains Peace.”



They are provocative and visually stunning gifts. Franck said, “We expect something of value to come in a box, like a shirt or book or jewelry—especially at Christmas time! But my boxes are empty of everything except a message that has no price.

I put inside the boxes a single word, such as ‘peace,’ ‘love’ or ‘hope.’”

Over the last decade the artist and his wife have shipped thousands of peace packages to countries and cities across the globe. All they ask in return is for the recipients to send him emails with photos of themselves and the boxes. Franck’s hope is that people who receive his boxes will devote some thought, & spark some conversation to **intangibles**...such as: peace, love, hope and joy.

He said, “I hope with my art to challenge people to reconsider their ability to influence change and question the fragility, value and priority given to concepts such as peace.” His idea has even spread to some schools & churches who make their own boxes and send them out.

My siblings in Christ, each & every day God sends peace packages to individuals all around the world. Psalm 85 tells us that the Lord our God will "speak peace to his people," & will call for them to respond by turning to him "in their hearts" (v. 8). God is generous with peace and salvation, but God requires a response. Each of us must accept this Life-Giving package, because we can also choose to not accept this peace package from God. So we say, “Return to sender please." and leave it unopened.

BUT if and when we open it, a precious collection of treasures spills out.

- "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet," says the psalm,
- "righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
- and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- The Lord will give what is good" (10-12).

God's peace package from Ps 85 contains more than meets the eye. *Packed into this box is the entire character of God:* Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace and goodness. All of these qualities are intertwined and mutually supportive, since love is connected closely to faithfulness, and true peace is always dependent on the presence of justice and righteousness.

When we tear open this package, we find the gift of God's **own self**. Thru an act of divine self-giving, God enters more deeply into our lives, so that our hearts will no longer be restless, but instead will **rest** and be at **peace** in God.

Oh my friends...a priceless treasure is placed before us, one that makes it possible for God's glory to dwell in our hearts. We need this gift now more than ever because we are not going to find peace by shopping at the Mall...or through Cyber Deals on Amazon. Amen??

Advent is a celebration of the coming of Jesus again & again in our lives, Our Prince of Peace and Lord of Lords! The peace package that needs to be opened is the gift of Christ today and every day leading up to Christmas – a gift we can receive with gratitude and delight. It is through the birth of Jesus that God speaks "peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts."

As we all know, far too often we seek material things to bring us peace...but in seeking Christ, we actually find it! Reordering our lives with this as a focus in preparation for Christmas and the coming year...should include an intention for those things that make us both receivers and givers of Peace. I challenge us this Advent to respond to the Life-Giving gift of Peace in the Christ-child by sending out some peace packages of our own.

At a time when Christmas packages are filled with everything *but* peace, how can we reclaim some of the missing treasures of this season? So what could it mean to send a peace package?

- You can extend steadfast love to a teenager who is rebelling with every ounce of his or her energy.
- You can practice love and faithfulness in your marriage, and make an effort to express appreciation to your partner.
- You can show righteousness in your school or workplace, by being honest and fair in all of your activities.
- You can work for peace in all your relationships, looking for ways to reduce tensions and increase harmony, instead of picking fights and spreading gossip.
- You can also just listen to others. To find peace, sometimes people just need to feel heard and to know that they are not alone in their struggles or suffering.

Oh my friends, if we invest as much in these kinds of packages as we do in our holiday gifts...this will turn out to be our best Christmas ever. Indeed by sending such peace packages we are living the challenge put before us today by Paul—sharing a key mark of a Christian: *"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, my hope is that each one of us is challenged to reconsider our ability to influence change by giving a higher priority and value to the Life-Giving Gift of Peace. I have for each family, couple or single person here today a small white box. I invite you to receive this gift from one of our lay leaders in the Narthex when you leave this morning. Take this peace box home; decorate it, be creative, have fun with your design and artwork. Just go with it, release your inner child. How do you create peace visually, sparked by your imagination & dreams?

How do you reveal the peace you have received today...or hope to receive this Advent...or desire to give away to another?

Rich & I created these peace boxes with our two grandkids on Thursday.



We love to color and paint together... so we talked about peace with Peter who is 3 and Abby who just turned 5.

How do you talk about such an intangible thing with preschoolers? Well we said peace is when you feel warm in your heart. Peace can be a time of calm and quiet...well their eyes lit up. Peter responded first saying **books** bring him peace. So we talked about how books make him feel. He mostly shared that he loves being in his mommy and daddy's lap or on the floor reading with them. Books make him smile and laugh and learn, he said.

Abby quickly chimed in, “Gigi I feel peace when I'm hugging mommy!” So we talked about why that is peaceful for her. She said she loves to hug and feel so close and happy. She said, “I just love hugs.” Life-Giving peace for my grandkids involved both a giving & receiving of peace-filled actions & connection filled w/warmth & calm presence.

Friends how do **you** reveal peace in your hearts and lives? It could be as simple as placing a single word like peace or hope, or joy or love or justice or HUGS inside this small peace package to spark or encourage family, or friends, or complete strangers to talk about such intangible, yet incredible Life Giving gifts.

As you leave worship this day, remember that a priceless gift is continually placed before you and I. God's PEACE...a PEACE that surpasses all understanding...a gift of God's glory to dwell in our hearts...as well as a gift to be given away. Life-Giving Peace...what a game changer this holiday season! Amen and amen!