

Earlier tonight Gracelyn Hoopingarner led us in a prayer for peace, as the second candle on our Advent wreath was lit.. God's people have been praying for peace for centuries, and we're still praying for peace, aren't we? Perhaps more than ever.

Many years ago I visited the Holy Land, Israel, on a tour with a group of pastors. I remember on our final night in Jerusalem, we were standing with a group of nuns, who showed us a section of ancient stone pavement that was down in the sub-basement of their convent building. Archaeologists had concluded that this section of pavement dated all the way back to the time of Christ. So it was very possible that Jesus' feet had walked on those very stones we were looking at.

And, as we stood in that inspiring corner of that ancient city, Jerusalem, I remember one of the nuns that night leading us in a somber, but deeply moving, prayer for peace. She talked about how Jerusalem had known so much fighting and destruction: for century after century before Jesus walked on the earth, during the years between when the infant Jesus was presented at the Jerusalem Temple and when he was crucified outside the city wall, and for thousands of years after Jesus ascended from this earth. And still today, there is fighting in Jerusalem, fighting in the Holy Land, fighting in our land, fighting all around the globe.

Our world is home to so many wars, conflicts, hostilities, and brawls. Nations fight. Ethnic and religious groups attack each other. Politicians battle. Neighbors dispute. Spouses clash. Siblings bicker. Classmates argue. Coworkers skirmish. Angry drivers act out their road rage. People holler

at store clerks over mask requirements. A kid brings a gun to his school, just yesterday Everywhere we turn, we see people who are angry, at war, not getting along. So often we are those people ourselves.

It's good we prayed for peace tonight. We'd better keep praying for peace. Our world needs it. Our country, our communities, and our families need peace. And so do we.

Many centuries before Jesus was born, God's prophet, Isaiah, foretold the coming of the Christ Child. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." "Prince of Peace," Jesus would be called, Isaiah prophesied. And Isaiah went on: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end ..." Of the peace Christ will bring, Isaiah prophesied, "There will be no end."

Why, then, are we praying still for peace? Was Isaiah a failed prophet? Was Jesus an unsuccessful Messiah? If God's plan in sending his Son to our world was to make our lives on earth blissfully peaceful, then something went radically wrong.

But that's really not it at all, is it? God's plan was so much greater than that, so much more far-reaching. It breaks God's heart, I'm sure, to see how we humans treat each other, and make our own lives miserable by squabbling and wrangling with each other. It must sadden God terribly to see the perfect world he created torn about constantly by our warfare, our enmity, and our violence.

And, yes, God could have sent his Son on a temporary peace mission. Jesus could have used his divine powers to

destroy all the weaponry and battle armor of his day. He could have locked up all the agitators and criminals, disbanded all the armies and navies of his day, and negotiated a whole bunch of truces between all the feuding members of our human family.

But that would have been a temporary peace, and God knows it wouldn't have lasted. See, God understands this human race of ours way better than we ever will. God knows the depths of your heart and soul far better than you can. And God knows something – something very sad -- that we all need to reconcile ourselves to. This world of humans will never know peace. Our human family can never be free from fighting and discord in this world.

God knows it's true. God still calls us to be peacemakers, and God expects us to work for peace. But God knows that none of us can manage to put aside our own sin, and straighten out our own lives, let alone conjure up something like world peace. But God's ultimate goal is not for us to just know peace here on earth. He's not just aiming for you and me to experience 60 or 80 or 100 years of peace, while we're living in this life. God wants for you and me to know peace, to know perfect peace, for all eternity, forever and ever and ever.

And that's why Jesus was born. That's why he came to earth on the first Christmas. That's why the prophet called him "Prince of Peace." That's what the angels sang about to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth."

Not the peace on earth we tend to think is so important. But a higher, grander, nobler, more sublime peace than that. Jesus came to bring peace between you and your God. Harmony between you and your maker. Concord between

you and the higher power who's going to judge your life one day. Friendship – lasting, unconditional, unbreakable friendship – between you and the One who guides and guards your life on this earth. Jesus brings peace between you and the King of heaven who wants to love you forever, even after your short life on this earth is over.

God's words of promise about unending peace came true when Jesus achieved forgiveness for sinners like you and me. Through Christ God set aside his anger over our sins, and in Christ God's grace is offered to all people. Not a short-lived forgiveness, or a transitory grace, or a temporary peace. When God forgives your sins, they are gone forever. He removes our sin from us as far as the east is from the west.

"Here is my peace," God said, when he delivered that baby in the manger. "Here, in Jesus, is the peace that will protect you through the long, hard years of your earthly pilgrimage. Here, in Jesus, is the peace that will propel you through the gates of heaven into eternal life."

Peace in Christ – it's a peace like none other. Some of you have that peace, I know; and I know how much it means to you to be a forgiven, beloved child of God. And if you don't have that kind of peace, I know you can find it in Jesus. If you know someone who doesn't have that kind of peace, I now you can help them find it in Jesus. To know real peace, you need Jesus in your life.

The Prince of Peace was born on that first Christmas, all those years ago, to give you peace for all eternity. Tonight is a perfect time for you to come to know peace in Christ, to receive the peace of Jesus in your life, to be at peace with your God. Open your heart to the Prince of Peace, and ask him to make his peace known in your life. Amen.