

# The Dream of Peace

## Christmas Eve Service

*Text: Micah 5:5; Luke 2:15*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*"... and he shall be the one of peace." Micah 5:5*

*"... and on earth peace..." Luke 2:15*

The Christmas Gospel seems to be such a warm and cozy message. But as a matter of fact I think, if we really see it in its context, it was a strong political statement. Luke pitted the Gospel of peace that came through Jesus over against the peace of the Roman Empire—the *Pax Romano*, that two hundred year period of relative peace in the ancient world that was made possible through the government of imperial Rome.

Peace has been an ancient dream. I wonder how old it is? I suppose it goes back to the very first folk who experienced violence and terror, and began to live with insecurity. There must have always been something in the depths of the human soul that yearned for peace. It is a very deep primal longing of the human heart—the longing for peace. Personal peace surely, but wellbeing and peace in the community of people, the nations. Israel's dreamers dreamed of peace in a world that was very much like our world, the rise of one empire and the fall of another, the smaller people squeezed between the paws of the great powers.

There were those poets and dreamers in Israel who had a vision of a different kind of world. Micah was one such. In the fourth chapter of his prophecy we read, "In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains." And then he goes on to envision Mt. Zion as that highest point of the world toward which all of the nations would flow and learn the law and the truth of God. He goes on to say, "they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; and nations shall not lift up swords against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." One of Israel's poets, one of the ancient world's dreamers who looked about him and said, "You know, there's a different kind of a world that is possible. There's a different kind of a world that ought to be."

It's interesting that it wasn't only Israel's dreamers and poets, but the great Roman poet Virgil, in the year 41-42 BC in his fourth epilogue, announces the birth of a World Savior. He announces in this poem the coming era of peace. It comes through the birth of a child he says, and probably the child that he had in mind was Octavian. Octavian was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar adopted Octavian as his own son, and when Virgil wrote this poem and gave expression to this vision of a child being born into the world to save the world and bring it peace, he very likely had Octavian in mind. But as he wrote, Julius Caesar was assassinated. There ensued fifteen years of terrible civil war. It was only in 29 BC when Octavian came back to Rome, the victor, having defeated Anthony and Cleopatra, that he becomes ruler and Caesar. Whether or not Octavian took the poem of Virgil as his destiny, I don't know. But his very first official act in 29 BC was to close the temple of Janus, the double-faced God of war. And he continued to strive to create peace. In the year 9 BC Octavian Augustus, called Augustus Caesar now, dedicated the great Augustine Altar of Peace and what ensued was what the historians call the *Pax Romano*, the Roman peace.

In 1890, in Asia Minor, there was discovered an inscription, an inscription to Augustus the Son of God. Julius Caesar had been elevated to the status of a state god after his assassination and his adopted son Augustus, thus was Son of God. This inscription that was discovered in 1890, and subsequently in other places as well, proclaimed to the eastern world, peace through this Savior who would fulfill the dreams of humankind. Ancestral hopes would be realized, and the broken world would be mended and healed. If this proclamation came out of Asia Minor, and if Caesar Augustus dedicated the Great Altar of Peace about 9 BC, we can be fairly certain that Luke, who writes the story of Jesus was aware of it because, when he tells us about the story of Jesus, he tells us that Caesar Augustus was in power and Quirinius was the Roman Governor, and all the world was called to be taxed.

Luke sets the birth of Jesus in the context of a Roman world, in the context of a Roman peace, in the context of an ancient world in which had been proclaimed the Saviorhood and the peace-bringing of one, Caesar Augustus. It was a legitimate dream of peace. It was an expression of a universal, human yearning, longing for a different kind of a world. But the peace of Caesar Augustus was a different peace than the peace of Jesus. So I have to believe that Luke was making a political statement. I think he was juxtaposing the peace of Jesus over against the peace of Caesar Augustus, because the peace of Caesar Augustus was not the peace of Micah, the prophet. The peace of Caesar Augustus was an enforced peace; it was a peace that was a consequence of the heavy hand of Rome that could enforce its edicts with its legions. It kept the world at bay. There was some great benefit of that, to be sure, but it was not the peace that comes from human community built on justice of the heart, of which the prophets dreamed. It was not the peace in which swords are changed to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. It was not the world in which the nations learned war no more.

No, Luke was writing of the birth of One, from the other end of the story, because remember, Luke wrote about the birth after the death. Luke wrote of the birth after the resurrection. Luke knew the hell that Jesus had gone through, but Luke's gospel of Jesus, which speaks of peace in the beginning, is a peace that was a peace to be secured only in the Way of Jesus. It was the Way of Jesus, as opposed to the way of Rome. It was a peace based on the end of all human domination. That, Luke was telling us in his gospel, was the peace that came through Jesus Christ. It was not the peace enforced by the power of Rome, but the peace that comes from God, to those who follow the Way of Jesus.

Two thousand years later the peace of which Luke spoke, peace that would come through this Jesus, has not been realized. There may be relative peace in Bosnia Hertsogovenia tonight, but it's a very fragile thing. We all have been disturbed by the anguish of those people suffering because of an ongoing war. Strife, violence, killing. The earth is soaked with blood. A couple of months ago I visited the shores of Normandy, the fiftieth anniversary of the scarred earth where that horrendous battle was fought. A week ago, perhaps some of you saw as well the special by David Brinkley on the Battle of the Bulge of fifty years ago. Did you hear in that special a recording of the voice of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said fifty years ago at Christmas, "It is not easy to wish the nation a Merry Christmas this year, nor to those who are standing for us around the world." It was a world at war, and a terrible price was exacted. There are those that suggest that maybe the past fifty years were better. But what was it? Just five years ago? We were so euphoric at this time of year because the Berlin wall had fallen and we thought that maybe the world was taking a significant step toward peace? The collapsing of an impasse of terror that held the world at bay for fifty years evaporated, allowing these ancient feuds to surge forth again.

So in 1994 at Christmas we speak of the peace of Jesus. But there is no peace. You see, we think of peace in terms of the balance of power and of political possibilities, but there is only one way to peace—it is the way of human community. It is by the ending of all human domination.

Will that peace ever come? I really don't know. I am not so sure that we are moving inevitably toward that universal Shalom. It doesn't seem that we are a lot farther along than the ancient Roman world, the *Pax Romano*, peace by dint of force. Will the prophet's dream ever be realized? There is a song we sing sometimes, "Let there be peace on earth," and then it says "and let it begin with me." Maybe it has to begin in the chambers of the human heart of each one of us, where we give ourselves unreservedly to the building of community and to standing against all forces of human domination, standing against all of that that robs any person of their humanity.

For Luke, the telling of the Christmas story from the perspective of Easter, from the perspective of Good Friday and Easter, was telling of the Gospel, that peace is

possible for those who were willing to die—to self, to all selfish pursuit, to all domination of another, who will live in community. That is the only way to peace.

Isn't it interesting that as far back as we go, whether in biblical lore or in the poetry of the rest of the world, there has been a dream, a longing dream of peace. Why can't we make it happen?

Maybe we will never be able to do more than to make it happen within our own lives and let it ripple out from there.