

The Prince of Peace Comes
4 in Watching for the Light

Isaiah 11:1-9

Psalm 96

Matthew 1:18-25

December 24, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Prayer: *Good and gracious God, you came quietly into our world in the darkness of a stable where few noticed and only insignificant pensioners and nomads and foreigners got your message. Quiet us now; heart, mind, and spirit, as we approach the highpoint of this busy season. Speak to us, touch us, with the nearness of your love and the depth of your peace shown forth through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen*

“At the heart of everything there is a story, a deep and grand story.”ⁱ That is a good thing. Otherwise we would have a difficult time making our way through the maze of emotions and activities and messages that pull at us this time of year. After all the parties and concerts, after all the year end business wrap-up, after all the semester tests and papers, and frantic runs through the stores, after all the traveling cross-town or cross-country, things quiet down, the family settles in, the friends arrive, and we are ready for a story. Not moral principles. Not abstract philosophy. But a Story. A Story about a man who was more than a man - Jesus.

I drive in here from home past a house that is decorated this year with no less than 4 larger than life seasonal plastic blow-ups. There is the Grinch, Santa, an Elf on the roof, and a Panda Bear. Each smiling brightly. Each only full of hot air. Big plastic blow-ups, nothing inside but hot air. We need something more.

It is good that at the center of this season is this beautiful deep and grand Story that puts a name, and a face, and a time, and a place to the questing of our human hearts.

Isaiah tells us this Messiah who comes to save us shall be one on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests.

He shall possess the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and counsel and might, and most of all, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. With his coming the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and one year old horse together, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy on all God’s holy mountain. For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.ⁱⁱ

Isaiah was pointing to a new King arising in Judah of his day some 700 years before Jesus. He also was pointing to the ideal Messiah King after the order of King David who will come to set things at right. A Messiah who will bridge the gap not only between powerful and weak nations, but between God and us, between heaven and earth.

As Matthew tells us his account of the Story, he has read Isaiah where this coming One is named - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.ⁱⁱⁱ As Prince of Peace he is the Bridge who will be the vital connector between Holy God and sinful humans.

Now in Matthew, the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins... they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Miroslav Volf says,

“We cannot construct it (the story, the bridge) using secular materials... it takes God to make such a bridge, a God who gives and forgives, a God who created human beings to find fulfillment in love. An invitation comes to then walk from one side (of the bridge) to the other, from self-centeredness to generosity.^{iv}”

That is the journey we are on this Advent as we are watching for the light and closing in on Christmas. We often skip over the battle imagery just before the titles – “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” – But remember the harsh real world realities Isaiah spoke to. Likewise Matthew with Israel under Roman occupation.

Each period of history, the time of Isaiah, the time of Jesus, separated by 700 years was, like most of the rest of history, filled with warfare and strife. It is true the Pax Romana of Jesus’ birth had brought top down Roman stability across the Empire. But it was a brutal peace. Yet Isaiah writes of the change that is coming. Promise of a coming day of peace when, “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”^v

Matthew writes of the tyrannical reign of Herod the Great and includes that dark chapter of Herod’s slaughter of all the infants in Bethlehem under the age of two in a desperate doomed attempt to snuff out and stop the Story’s unfolding. That was peace first century style. Both at the beginning and ending of this Prince of Peace there is suffering and death, death of the infants at his birth, death of the very Son of God himself at his crucifixion.

Isaiah and Matthew both throw light on our longing for peace, and our inability to achieve it by our own human efforts. In Isaiah’s day, 700 years later in Matthew’s day, 2000 years later, in our day, we still long for peace. We know the insanity of war, but war continue in Ukraine and Gaza most vividly, but also in Iran and Yemen and Ethiopia and Somalia and Syria and the Congo, among other places. The world has not long lived without war. Over the last 5000 years there have been approximately 8,700 wars. And still they go on. Yet still the undying dream continues of a coming day of peace when the lion and lamb dwell together harmoniously.

At times the dream has been more of a reality than others. A dream of a more peaceful unified world. At no time does the dream arise more personally, more passionately, more poignantly, than at Christmas. The dream emerging from this deep and grand Story.

“Peace on Earth” through this Prince of Peace. If you stop to think about it, it is pretty amazing how much God is willing to entrust his vast deep and grand Story to the responses of a few insignificant people. Joseph, for example. The Story hinges not on the decrees and actions of Caesar and Herod. They are simply the stage on which the Story unfolds. The Story hinges on the responses of old relatives, Zechariah and Elizabeth, with their late-in-life child John the Baptist, and nameless bit players, an innkeeper, shepherds, wise-men.

Certainly no character is more central to what unfolds than a teenage peasant girl named Mary, virgin mother of Jesus. But also there is Joseph, his earthly father. The keeper of peace who makes possible the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Joseph is probably the most overlooked participant in the whole story. Usually he is just the silent shadowy bearded figure in the nativity scene, back off center from the manger and the mother. He never says a word. I was Joseph in the first grade play at Hugh Goodwin Elementary School. It was an easy role. Just stand there in the brown bathrobe, looking on. I did not have to say a word. But the role of the real Joseph was anything but easy.

We are not told much about him, just that he was a carpenter, that he was living in a little village called Nazareth, up in Galilee, 90 miles away from his ancestral home. Bethlehem, home of the descendents of King David. That is really the only distinguishing note about Joseph. Though he was a humble carpenter, he was descended from the noble family line of David. Sort of like saying you are related to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson.

For all that goes unsaid by Joseph, there is a lot that is actually undertaken by this silent carpenter. Without him there would have been no story worth telling. We’d be left with just the plastic blow-up Grinches and Pandas.

Nothing is more important for what unfolds than the simple description of Joseph, as “being a just man.” Joseph is a man of integrity. Joseph is a man of character. Joseph is a man of faith. Deeply committed to the Jewish traditions in which he was raised, well acquainted with the laws of right and wrong. Joseph knows the commandment about adultery. He knows adultery is wrong. Joseph will do the right thing. But quietly.

This emphasis on Joseph is lifted up by Matthew because he very intentionally wants to link Jesus to the specific family tree of the Great King David. To do that Matthew begins by unpacking all those begats in chapter one just before where we started

reading. “The book of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”^{vi}

He goes on to name the names, “Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...” On and on it goes, until coming to Matthan the father of Jacob, and “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born who is called the Messiah.”^{vii}

Joseph, you see, is not only the significant earthly protector and peacekeeper of Mary and Jesus. Joseph is the indispensable family link. Matthew weaves it very dramatically. 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian Exile, 14 generations from the return from Exile to this Story. Matthew wants us to know where Jesus fits into the family tree and why Joseph is so essential. The keeper of peace for the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Christmas is our opportunity to make this family connection. At Christmas many of us make the journey home, back to people and places from which we came. We reconnect with family. We reconnect with values and traditions and roots that may have been long neglected. We reconnect with the Person so definitely and deliberately inscribed onto the center stage of the planet. “Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, in whom all things hold together.”

And this story that Jesus...will save his people from their sins.”^{viii} Gospel narrator Matthew goes on to connect the dots for us by noting, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”^{ix}

Matthew wants us all to be able to make this great family connection, all the way back to David, all the way back to Abraham, all the way back to God the Creator of us and all things. And to Jesus, the one in whom Paul says,

“the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the one in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, the one who is before all things, and in whom all things hold together. The one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom God reconciled to himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

At Christmas we are invited to connect deeply with this great story that through this One God and this One family, all families of the earth, and all people of the earth are loved and may be saved. For this Jesus is Immanuel. “God with us.” “God with me.” “God with you.”

Try to imagine the DISRUPTION Joseph felt in his little village when word got out that Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant, and not by him. In that Middle Eastern world the law provided for ostracism at the least and stoning at the most, of a woman caught in

such a situation. (And Joseph could require this in good religious conscience). Joseph yet courageously takes another tact.

“Being a just man” may be the most important lines in the story. “Being a just man,” Joseph decides to handle this quietly. He will go over to the synagogue and have papers drawn up to undo what has been done without shining the light of shame upon Mary. By so doing Joseph will be allowing the shame to fall on him. The townsfolk will think he was the father who would not follow through with what he had committed to.

What is disrupting your life this year as you make your plans for Christmas? You may be in the middle of a similar situation to that of Joseph. You may be experiencing shame or embarrassment or disappointment or despair. You may be experiencing a different sort of disruption. A disruption of a relationship, a job, a health diagnosis, a death. But chances are you are experiencing some sort of disruption in your life as you prepare for this Christmas. Life is a series of disruptions. Life is what happens to you when you had other plans.

At Christmas may you experience the Deliverance God sends. May you receive Jesus afresh, Through him your Disruption may be turned to Deliverance. Joseph pushes us out of our comfort zones, beyond conventional law morality to love morality. Maybe it was from Joseph that Jesus saw modeled the limits of legalism and the power of love which led him later to heal a man on the Sabbath and stop a mob from stoning a woman caught in adultery.

This Christmas may we all receive the gift God offers us- peace, deep peace, peace that lasts, through his Son Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

“O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!

ⁱ Brian D. McLaren The Secret Message of Jesus, p. 26

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 11:1-9 selected.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 9:6.

^{iv} Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge, p.21.

^v Is. 11:9

^{vi} Mt. 1:1.

^{vii} Mt. 1:16.

^{viii} Mt. 1:21.

^{ix} Mt. 1:23.