

“Why Peace?”

Luke 1:68-79

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December 10, 2006, The Second Sunday in Advent

For the life of me, I cannot understand why we light the candle of peace. Candles of hope, joy, and love make sense to me, but why peace? I began to seriously ponder this question when I heard that Thanksgiving night and the day after police were called in for crowd control as shoppers waited for the stores to open with the latest toys and electronics. This placed Christmas and peace on opposite ends of reality. Perhaps power would be a more truthful candle for the second Sunday in Advent. Power is something we know about and even worship. Certainly the athletes we admire show more power than peacefulness. We hear more about power brokers than peace-makers. And of course, the holidays don't seem to move us towards peace. The other night as I left Vons two cars were trying to back up at the same time and neither would give up. They just kept honking at each other. If you seek peace, be sure not to turn on the television. It's not just the news I'm talking about. It's that the majority of shows on every evening show more and more explicit violence. What are we teaching our children to be interested in? So if our world both on large and small scale values violence to solve its problems or to be tantalizing or just interesting to watch, then why peace? Why bother?

And yet...and yet we hear again these words of Zechariah: *By the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.* Something deep within us knows that underlying the universe is a longing to reflect a beauty that only peace can bring. This is why we light the candle of peace! Now we know the Bible has examples of violence done in God's name and evoking God's blessing; but we also know that the One in whom we Christians see the face of God most clearly, the One for whom we wait, was One of peace, not violent power.

It was not that Jesus was too weak to use violence to intervene in history. He was a charismatic holy man; he had attracted a crowd. In fact, a violent intervention was what was expected of him by many of his followers as well as the Romans occupying Palestine. His followers thought he'd use his new-found fame as a rallying cry to motivate the Jews to revolt. After all, they'd had enough of being under the thumb of Rome. And the Romans feared Jesus' ability to draw a crowd and incite a riot during Passover. And yet, Jesus did not choose violence; he chose peace. This is why we light the candle of peace!

I wonder why, when many of us, call ourselves Christians (people who try to follow Christ), why then does so much of our culture focus on solving our problems through the threat of power and violence? Why are we fascinated by films depicting extreme violence? It feels to me a little hypocritical to say that peace is the path we follow. Here is where the Bible's core message runs counter to our culture. It offers a different way. And it is the way of peace.

Now what if Jesus had chosen power over peace? Would we even be here today? What if Ghandi had chosen violent intervention or Martin Luther King picked up arms against injustice? Would they be revered as contemporary prophets?

There have been those who have listened carefully and heard the Christ call to choose peace. And their lives have been powerful witnesses to the Spirit which is the true and lasting ground of being. And we long to join them more faithfully, more completely, on the pathways of peace. This is why we intentionally take time to remind ourselves through word, ritual, and song

that we were borne to be peacemakers. And we have an inspiring example in the One, Jesus, who came not as warrior but who came from Mary's womb, who came from the very heart of God.

Perhaps one reason the path of peace is often the road least traveled is because it can be costly. It can even cost you your life. But we know that there is no power on earth great enough to make us 100% safe and secure. In fact, to choose violence is to place one's life in certain danger. But peace is costly, there's no doubt about it. Jesus was killed. And yet, if the world has continued to celebrate his birthday every December 25th for 2000 years, then surely he still lives.

Now, to quote John Lennon, "you may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." There may be situations that call for power over to bring about lasting peace; but this should be the very last resort. The thing about peacemaking is that it is best if we work for it preemptively. It's like a child who we nurture with great attention and with hope for their future well being. We don't ignore the child's needs for 18 years and then assume their lives will turn out OK. We invest our time, love, and usually a large sum of money to nurture the child now for a future yet to be. It needs to be this way with peace. It's been said before, "If you pray for peace, then work for justice." If we seek peace preemptively, then we give our all to make it come to be by creating a world that is just, particularly for those who cannot do for themselves without our help. This is what enables peace to happen

I want to tell you another of Father John Westerhoff's stories. Some years ago he was engaged in a project of reconciliation among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. People of both faiths were invited to become acquainted by living together for a few days in houses along the line of battle which previously separated them. One morning as the group gathered for worship, a small boy, a Protestant, sat near a Catholic monk. Curious, he reached out and touched the monk's robe. Then he whispered, "Nothing happened." When asked about his words, he said that he'd always been told that if he touched a priest, something terrible would happen, but nothing happened. Then the priest gently and kindly replied, "Oh yes, something did just happen, and nothing will ever again be the same." Peace often comes in the quietest of ways as we live our daily lives.

Today we dare once more to light this candle of peace, as we do every year, because our very best impulses tell us this is truth. We believe that the peace of the Divine, the peace that passes all understanding, is possible. And we remember and believe the words of the prophet: *By the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*