

Peace

First Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Second Reading: Luke 2:1-20

It was the chilled and blustery Midwestern eve of Christmas as worshipers gathered, packed into pews that for 363 days a years would never have the need to support that kind of weight. It's the one night of the year that pastors hope the local fire marshal doesn't feel a sudden awakening of her religious roots, and decides this shall be the night she will return to church. As congregants and visitors scootched closer together to allow room for latecomers, the irritation of the outside cold gave way to heavy eyes and nodding heads with the gathered mass of bodies pushing up the room temperature to a swelter by the time the pre-service music drew to a close. Nevertheless the setting was Christmas card idyllic with candlelit hurricane lamps at each window, their soft ribbons of candlelight dancing with shadows across the pastel walls under the subdued glimmer of chandeliers turned low.

A beloved octogenarian, a pillar of the congregation for decades, ever so ponderously stepped across the chancel to the Advent wreath, and scrupulously enunciated the liturgy of the Christ candle. Hymns were sung, prayers were offered, Luke's version of the Nativity was read, and a

meditation appropriate to the birth story was delivered by the revered pastor whose voice evinced a balm for the stressed and worried.

And then ... and then, it was time for the offertory. A brooding 17-year-old, having resigned himself to the inevitability of the moment, stepped into the pulpit to sing a solo, a tune not actually written for Christmas, and with no reference to the Nativity — *Let There Be Peace on Earth*. It's a pleasant heartstring kind of a song, maybe a bit closer to a Coke commercial than to *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, but it has often been appropriated for Christmas, linking it to the theme of Jesus as the Prince of Peace and bearer of peace.

Yet, that was not the debate going on in the singer's mind. The teen's debate centered on the question of how he had managed to get dragged to this moment in the first place. A local attorney, who happened to be on the worship committee, had offered the invitation, which in a small town would be better termed an *obliteration*, particularly when the invitation was relayed to me, yes me ... by my mother, who had a Phd in guilt-gifting. It would be rude, immature, in bad taste, and possibly illegal for me to turn down such an invitation.

I did not love the song, but it wasn't objectionable. So, that's not what fueled my dour mood. It wasn't the whole paranoia of singing in public, either. I had regularly sung in groups for all sorts of public occasions. Yet, every teen in here can relate to the utter mortification of being coerced into a public responsibility by your parent. Oh ... serenity now! Well, I stepped into that pulpit and I sang that blasted song ... not well ... and without one iota of peace in my heart.

At least it wasn't as humiliating as the previous year when, with a driver's license in my pocket, I was bludgeoned into wearing a robe made from glittery curtains, along with a Burger King crown, and directed to carry a cardboard box, spray-painted gold, down the center aisle of the sanctuary, singing the third verse of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*.

Compared to that, maybe the *Let There Be Peace on Earth* gig wasn't so bad. The saving grace, of course, was that in 1978, we did not possess the technology to livestream the service. So, there is no digital evidence. Thanks be to God.

Now, I may not have *Let There Be Peace on Earth* on my playlist, but its last line seems hauntingly relevant in these fractious times. *Let there be*

peace on earth; and let it begin with me. Advocating for the making of peace may seem naive, almost absurd when your anxiety is spiking because you cannot even promise peace around the dinner table tomorrow. Over twenty-five hundred years ago, the prophet Ezekiel perfectly described the simmering animosity and agitation pervading our culture today. “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The heinous terror attack in Israel; the slaughter of civilians in Gaza; the waves of that war flooding our shores with ethnic and religious hate; just a couple more ingredients thrown into the toxic brew of suspicion and blame and anger we drink each day from the spigot of social media. It’s hard to sing *Let There Be Peace on Earth* through gritted teeth.

An editorial in the *Observer* last week lamented the seeming contradiction between the horrific death toll in the Holy Land and the singing of Christmas carols in American churches. The author, a pastor, rued the task of planning Christmas Eve worship against the backdrop of human cruelty and violence in the place of Jesus’ birth. The author asks, “How can we dare to sing of a ‘silent night,’ knowing that no child in Gaza can possibly ‘sleep in heavenly peace’?”

I understand the sentiment and appreciate the role of lament in our faith tradition and agree that this is certainly a time for lament. Yet, I disagree with the author's decision to leave the questions out there without proceeding further into the traditional form of lament offered in Scripture.

While the Psalmist never shies away from lifting his grievances to God in the bluntest of terms, there is typically a return to language of trust in the God who hears the lament. For example, in Psalm 42, the psalmist laments: *“I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’ As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”* The author asks the question, brutally honest about his despair and doubt. Yet, the psalmist doesn't stop at the question, but returns to confession, to trust: *“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”*

One blessing of the Psalms is the way they grant us permission to be brutally honest with God, not holding back our emotions. Yet, an additional gift of the Psalms is the way they shake off our blinders, reminding us that

our struggles, even our sufferings are not so unique or unprecedented as we may have thought. Anxiety, distress, encroaching violence, and fear combine to narrow our vision to the point of being unable to conceive that we are not the first to suffer this distress, to endure this threat. The psalmist reminds us that faithful people have suffered before; faithful people have felt the infection of doubt, injustice, and despair before; and nevertheless, faithful people have continued to pray, and to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in spite of the chaos enveloping them. Israeli Jews celebrated the Sabbath on Friday night; Islamic Palestinians said their prayers upon the call of the muezzin; and Christians in Israel and Gaza sang Christmas carols tonight.

Our carols do not ignore the universality of human iniquity or the real threats weighing upon us in this broken world — *“Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today”* — *“No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”* — *“He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”*

The early Sixteenth Century artist, Albrecht Altdorfer, depicted the nativity amidst the ruins of a building, the holy family surrounded by the

fallen stones, mortar, and brick, Creation seemingly collapsing around them. Over 400 years later the painting was housed near Berlin where Allied bombing raids created similar scenes of devastation, just as German bombing had created in England. The painting reveals strong traces of burns stemming from the time during the chaos of WWII when it served as a surface on which a candle was placed.

At this same time, the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was being held in Tegel prison on the outskirts of Berlin. Imprisoned for conspiring with the opposition to Hitler, Bonhoeffer would be executed just days before the war's end. With the arrival of the season of Advent in 1943, Bonhoeffer's parents and loved ones were certainly not feeling the hope of Christmas. However, in a letter to his parents from Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer writes, "Although I am not at all clear about whether, or, how, letters get to you, I want to write on this afternoon of Advent Sunday: Remember the Altdorfer Christmas scene, in which the Holy Family is depicted with the manger amidst the ruins of a broken down house? It is really contemporary. We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us. I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this,

even more intensively, because we do not know how much longer we have.”

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison*)

We must do all this, even more intensively, because we do not know how much longer we have. The suffering, death, and devastation in the Holy Land, the dysfunction of political polarities around the family Christmas table, the anxiety of anticipation as we await the next inevitable mass shooting in a land with literally more guns than people, the fear of what the CT scan may reveal, the dread of the next round of chemo, the specter of depression, the threat of fentanyl. There are plenteous reasons to say we have no song left in us. Yet, we must pray, we must sing, even more intensively and for as long as we have breath; for in spite of human cruelty and brokenness, love has broken through the chaos, and dwells even amidst whatever ruins we encounter.

The child we celebrate this night would one day say, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid”* ... and ... *“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”*

How can we sing Christmas carols in such a troubled world? The psalmist understood what the gospel narrative of Jesus' life would express, *"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."*

Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. My 1970s warbling rendition, notwithstanding, the meaning is relevant to your now, whatever your now is tonight. Love doesn't wait for the suffering to end before breaking in, the sound of angels singing channeled through church choirs and congregational carols. Tonight we sing for the people who cannot raise their voices above their discouragement. Tonight, we sing of the love that alone can build the bridge from despair to joy. You may never sign a treaty, but you are meant to be an instrument of God's peace, reflecting the mercy and grace of our Redeemer, the hope of our reconciliation. So, let there be peace on earth, and... let it begin with me. Amen.