

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

SERMON: The weeks leading up to Christmas have for many of us been extremely busy, full of fun activities - to be sure - but also full of the kind of responsibilities that can cause stress. My own wider family has been involved in ballet performances of the Nutcracker, Christmas pageant rehearsals in their local church, final exams at school, shopping in person and online, finding the right presents for each of the family members, and then wrapping the gifts to be placed under the Christmas tree. This morning my sons and daughters were exchanging texts about wrapping the gifts, with one exclaiming that he had begun wrapping before 8 am while another told of staying up until 1:30 am doing her wrapping. It's been a very busy time for many of us, and not a few of us - I think - are ready for a moment of quiet when we can relax and enjoy the spirit of Christmas, listening to the carols playing on the stereo, thinking about the deeper messages that come to us through the story of Christ's birth.

One of the themes of Christmas that always touches me deeply is heard on the lips of the angels as they proclaim the birth of the Christ child. You may have already heard it this evening - "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill toward all." Peace on earth! What a wonderful hopeful word! I'm not alone, I suspect, in longing for peace. I'm not alone, I am sure, in being distressed by the constant stream of news reports of wars, and how devastating those wars are to the most vulnerable - the poor, the children, the elderly, not to mention its devastation of fragile ecosystems and economies of the regions. Reading of the 50,000 people killed in Gaza and hundreds more in southern Lebanon, reading of the torture that took place under the leadership of Syrian president Bashaar al- Assad - deeply grieves my spirit, and I find myself wondering how it is that human beings give themselves permission to torture and kill the people they designate as their enemy, and to wrap their killing in cloaks of righteousness! When did that first happen, and how is it that we've become accustomed to killing as a way of navigating the challenging work of relating to people of other nations and philosophies.

I know that I'm not alone in grieving a world constantly at war, and wishing for a quality of peace that might make living in our world a safer and more equitable experience. Many are the poets and song-writers who have penned their own pleas for peace in our world. One of the best known of these, I suppose, is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who on Christmas Day in 1863, burdened by the horror of the bloody Civil War and the severe injuries that threatened to claim the life of his son, Lieutenant Charles Appleton Longfellow, wrote a poem, later put to music, that captures both the grief of war and the hope of Christmas. Longfellow's poem begins, "I heard the bells on Christmas day / Their old familiar carols play, / And wild and sweet the words repeat / Of peace on earth, good will to men." The poem continues in that vein for several stanzas before turning its thoughts to the pain of that time. It continues: "And in despair I bowed my head / "There is no peace on earth," I said, / "For hate is strong and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good will to men." What was true in the 1860's was

also true in Peter Marshall's 1950's when he wrote of "strikes and bread lines, hunger marches, rebellion, and bloodshed." It is true today as well, as we think of the human carnage in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and the Darfur region of the Sudan, and understand in excruciating detail how "hate is strong and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good will to men." In spite of being gripped with fear and grief, Longfellow's "Christmas Bells" ends with a hopeful word, for he too felt that the message of Christmas held the power to overcome the forces of evil in his time. He writes, "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: / "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; / The wrong shall fail, the right prevail / With peace on earth, good will to men." His belief that the wrong shall fail and the right prevail is inspirational, and for that I'm grateful, but I would also say that my hope that of the right and good thing prevailing sometimes wears thin, and the timeline for its realization seems awfully long; but I do look forward with Longfellow to a time when the machinery of war will crumble, and the works of peace will succeed. What a day that will be!

Many have noted how in our own time public discourse and human relations have been greatly strained, much of it attributable to some nasty political campaigns, but a lot of it attributable to a loss of trust in the institutions of our world, and to a loss of respect and openness toward one another. Does the Christmas message have anything to offer to our frazzled society. Is it possible that a renewed belief in the gospel of 'peace on earth' might help to rebuild our trust in one another, and in the institutions that bring us together.

Listening to the radio a few years back, I heard the familiar voice of my friend Willem Lange reflecting on an incident from his life which revealed to him the power of God's peace to bring about a change in human relations. Willem's story went like this:

"Some years ago, at Christmastime, I had a dispute with the owner of a local garage. I thought he'd overcharged me. We had some harsh words, and I loudly resolved never to darken his door again with my business. I found other options, and for a couple of years nursed a righteous little private grudge against the man.

It happened that about that time our church fathers instituted a new liturgy, and revived an early Christian practice called "Passing the Peace": The priest pronounces a peace upon the members of the congregation, and then they exchange it with each other. It upset some of the old folks, who preferred their worship private; but we younger ones took to it easily. Especially me. I like to sit in the front pew, and there isn't usually much company up there.

Then one morning . . . I turned around to greet the person in the pew behind me -- and there was my old adversary (the owner of the local garage). I had several options available to me. By pure instinct, I chose the right one: I shook his hand, wished him peace, and meant it, too. It was the end of our quarrel. We were friends till he died, a couple of years later. And I'm awfully glad of it. I had grown quite comfortable with my little grudge; and not until it had been shattered did I realize what a heavy and stupid thing it was."

It's not often that a church service brings about a change in relationships and behavior, but once in a while it does and it is a joy to behold. And so I close my thoughts this evening with a simple

"Peace on Earth, Good Will to All"
Luke 2:1-20

request, that we follow that ancient practice of exchanging a greeting of peace with one another. I will wish you peace, and then I encourage you to turn to your neighbor or someone sitting alone and wish them peace. "May God's peace be with you." (And also with you.). Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Property of Reverend Richard Slater