

Names for the Messiah Sermon Series
Prince of Peace
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During Advent, we've been looking at different names for the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah. Isaiah was talking about a king that would come to power, eradicate the enemies, and re-establish the throne of King David, Israel's most successful king. The prevailing wisdom among Christians is that the king Isaiah was predicting was Jesus Christ. So far, we've talked about "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," and "Everlasting Father." Today, just a few days before Christmas, we're going to talk about what it means for the coming Christ child to be the "Prince of Peace."

The title itself is problematic because it juxtaposes two antithetical concepts. The first concept is the idea of royalty. In Isaiah's time, kings ruled tribes and nations, and did so by providing protection for their subjects and overseeing the general welfare and well-being of the kingdom. Back then, kings and princes made their fame through conducting successful wars. The more people you conquered, the safer your kingdom was. So, a title like "prince" carries with it some of the violent, strong-armed symbolism in Isaiah's time.

Contrast that with the word "peace." The Hebrew word here is "shalom," which goes so much further than our simple understanding of peace. For us, peace is the absence of conflict, but "shalom" is a much more holistic word, encompassing our relationship with God, each other, and God's creation. It denotes a harmony, a divine symbiosis, an ethos of serenity and prosperity for all God's children.

This kind of peace is not coerced but happens organically. In Isaiah's and in Jesus' time, the peace that was experienced was imposed. Think about the Pax Romana. There was peace because if you weren't peaceful, you'd feel the full pressure of the Roman Empire. It's like when I would act up as a kid and my PawPaw would get out his yardstick and lay it across his lap. There was no more acting up after that. Talk about coercing peace! In those days, peace was imposed on the losers by the winners. That's a far cry from the shalom about which Isaiah is talking.

Isaiah's peace is not won with the use of force but exists because of the absence of it. As long as there are instruments of violence in our midst, peace will only be a restless, unstable possibility. More weapons may make for peace, but it's an uneasy peace built on easily shifting sand, not on the rock of God's shalom. Isaiah's peace is forged by turning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, not by making more swords and spears.

So in this title, we combine the implied military might of royalty with the shalom of God's peace, and then place the title on a little baby lying in a manger, trusting that he'll be the one to bring peace to our world, that he will be the king in our lives who protects us and helps us prosper. Each year we hope that will happen, and each year there are more school shootings and terrorist attacks. Is Jesus really the Prince of Peace?

As I understand it, this is one of the major sticking points for Jews in not believing in Jesus as the promised Messiah. As they read the Old Testament prophecies, the Messiah would come into the world, vanquish all the enemies of God's people, and restore Jerusalem to the vision of the peaceful kingdom God intended. I once asked a rabbi about his understanding of the Messiah, and he said, "Every day, I wake up and look out the window. I see shootings and pain and violence, so I say to myself, 'No, the Messiah is not here yet.'" He then said, "Kory, you and

I are waiting on the same thing. You're waiting for the Messiah to come a second time, and I'm waiting for the Messiah to come the first time." For the rabbi, because the world was still broken, the promises of the prophets had yet to be fulfilled.

For us Christians, we believe Jesus was the Messiah, and his coming did more than conquer an earthly foe. He conquered sin and death, paving a way for us to experience God's forgiveness and to have eternal life with God in Heaven. And believe me, those are some really cool Christmas presents! Life-changing, in fact. But there's still the sticking point of the fact that the peace Christ promised us is not present in our world. In fact, you could argue our world gets more violent, more divisive every year. Is Jesus really the Prince of Peace?

I believe he is, but he doesn't bring the kind of peace we expect. In our world today, peace makes for a better political slogan than a credible reality. Peace seems so elusive that it's easy to give up on hoping for it. Just the other night, I was showing two of our younger Boy Scouts the meaning of our stained-glass windows. We got to the window with the olive branch, which I explained was a symbol for peace. One boy thought the branch was from an oak tree and another thought it was part of a grapevine. They argued back and forth a bit and then – as young boys sometimes do – the actually starting throwing punches at each other. In the church sanctuary. Over the meaning of a symbol for peace. So I got out my Pawpaw's yardstick. The struggle is real, y'all. Peace is hard.

But that doesn't mean we should give up on its presence in our world. As followers of Christ, we must keep talking about peace because, as Bible scholar Walter Breuggemann says, "The rhetoric of peace serves an important function in keeping available a vision of an alternative society in an alternative world." We have to keep talking about peace so that we don't forget what peace looks like, or else we'll start to accept the violence and conflict in our world as normative. This is not what God created the world to be.

So when is God gonna fix it? Many of us wonder when Jesus will fulfill this promise to be the Prince of Peace. How much longer will God let us go on hating and killing each other? Surely, Jesus has the power to bring peace, right? I want to pose a different theory about that. At the end of John's gospel, after the resurrection, the disciples are huddled together in a locked room for fear of the Roman soldiers doing to them what the soldiers did to Jesus. The risen Jesus appears to them and says, "Peace be with you," and shows them his pierced hands and side. He says to them a second time, "Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you." He then breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Here's my theory: when Jesus did that, he gave his followers – that includes us – what we need to enact the peace that God has promised us. Rather than waiting for Jesus to come back and set things right, maybe Jesus has already given us what we need to bring peace to our world. We have the power of the Holy Spirit at our disposal to make peace, using God's love and grace and forgiveness and hospitality to restore God's shalom to this fractured world we live in. Easy, right?

A little girl was drawing a chart on a piece of paper. Her dad asked her, "What are you working on?" She said, "I'm making up a plan to create world peace." The dad said, "Wow, that's a pretty big job!" She replied, "Don't worry, two other girls in class are working on it, too." Maybe what we need to make Christ's peace a reality isn't more guns and missiles; maybe we need the innocence of a child to help us see how absurd our violence is toward each other. I believe Christ isn't coming as a child this year to bring peace; I believe he's coming as a child to remind us that we have been called to be peacemakers in his name.

That peaceful innocence is subversive because it undoes the evil of the ruling empire, which tells us that we are only at peace when we have subdued those who threaten us. Therefore, we need an enemy to combat, an “other” to hate, so that we can make ourselves feel safe. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron said, “The way to stop war is to stop hating the enemy.” But we need enemies, don’t we? That’s how we know who to fight in order to make ourselves safe and impose peace in our world. And yet, that’s not the kind of peace Jesus promises.

The peace Jesus promises us is the kind that connects us to each other at the deepest human level. It’s easy to hate someone who is a stranger. It’s much harder to hate someone who is a fellow human, a fellow sufferer. But if we have someone to hate, then hate becomes more acceptable and our expectations for peace are lowered. As Richard Rohr writes, “Hate makes the world go around. Once you have a specific thing to hate, it takes away your fear.” We’ve bought into the lie that life is more peaceful when we have an enemy we can fight against, because then peace is defined by an absence of conflict, not by God’s shalom.

And yet, in the midst of the hate and conflict and divisiveness in our world today, we can’t let go of that alternative vision of peace, because it’s from that vision that we draw hope for God’s peace becoming a reality. Author Ryan LaMothe tells the story of Gerda Klein, a Holocaust survivor. As the war was ending, her Nazi guards were intent on killing as many Jews as possible before the Americans arrived, so they gathered all the remain Jews in their camp into a warehouse filled with explosives. The guards fled, thinking the building would explode, but the rain had shorted the electrical connections. Gerda was able to squeeze her frail frame out of the building just as a jeep pulled up and an American officer jumped out to greet her. She explained the situation and the two of them went to the warehouse to free the rest of the Jews. When they got the warehouse, the American officer reached out and opened the door for Greta. She said that, in that small act, when set against atrocities she had endured, her faith in humanity was restored.

There’s nothing heroic about opening the door for someone, is there? And yet, peace will not come to this earth in one large, supernatural act. It will come through thousands of simple acts, done daily, done for each other, done for those not like us. Peace will not come through force or coercion; it will come through sacrifice, something as small as letting someone else go first in line or paying for the person’s drink behind you or loving someone even when they’re being a grinch. When the resurrected Jesus said to his disciples, “Peace be with you,” his next act was to show them his wounds, his pierced hands and side. We are all wounded, aren’t we? Christ’s peace will not come from inflicting more wounds, but from helping each other heal. It’s hard to hate a fellow sufferer.

As we’re about to enter what promises to be a difficult year for our country, this Christmas may be more important than ever. We need to be reminded that Christ is coming to show us what peace looks like. It’s not finger-pointing and name-calling. It’s opening doors for each other, joining hands together, looking past ideological and political differences to see the fellow sufferer in each other. Is Jesus really the Prince of Peace? Well, I guess the answer to that question depends on us, how we choose to live our lives. Peace be with you. Merry Christmas.