

“WHAT CAN I GET YOU FOR CHRISTMAS? – V: PEACE”

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Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Last weekend, I watched for the umpteenth time the original version of “Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street.” What a wonderful movie! Do you remember that, at the end of the movie, the reason the case against Kris Kringle was dismissed in court was because the US Postal Service had delivered thousands of letters written to Santa Claus to him. So if the post office thought he was real, so did the judge! Case dismissed!

One of the camera shots in the movie panned the big pile of letters on the judge’s desk and then zeroed in on a few of them – and they all had Santa Claus’ name written on the envelopes as only little tiny hands could!

Letters to Santa – I haven’t written one in a long, long, long time, but you know what? I hope children today still do that. I know some do, because I read a few of them as I prepared this sermon. Here’s just a sample:

“Dear Santa Claus,

When you come to my house there will be cookies for you. But if you are real hungry, you can use our phone and order a pizza!”

“Dear Santa,

I want a puppy. I want a playhouse. Thank you. I’ve been good most of the time. Sometimes I’m wild.”

“Dear Santa (from a 4 year-old),

I’ll take anything because I haven’t been very good this year.”

“Dear Santa,

I’m not going to ask for a lot. Here’s my list: The Etch-a-Sketch animator, 2 packs of number 2 pencils, crayon markers, and the big gift – my own color TV! Well, maybe you could drop the pencils. I don’t want to be really selfish!”

Oh, out of the mouths of babes! And then, when Christmas comes and they get presents, oh, it gets interesting then too! Consider the case of the young boy who got a harmonica for Christmas in the mail from his uncle. He didn't get to see this particular uncle in person until after the first of the year, and when he did his uncle asked him how he liked it. "Oh thank you for giving it to me, Uncle," he said, "it's been great! It's the best Christmas gift I ever got!"

The uncle was thrilled. "Great!" he said, "do you know how to play it?"

"Oh, I don't play it," the nephew replied. "You see, Mom gives me a dollar a day not to play it during the day and Dad gives me five dollars a week not to play it at night!" (On-line, "All I Want for Christmas is Peace," Mount Greenwood Community Church)

Oh, the lengths some people will go to for peace.

Actually, all kidding aside, we kind of understand those parents, don't we? We want peace, we **really** want peace and quiet, we really want the "all is calm, all is bright" thing.

Yet, peace seems so elusive right now, doesn't it, maybe more than ever? Our lives are hectic, fast-paced and getting faster every day. All of the technology that we have in our lives may do some wonderful things, but it doesn't make them more peaceful, that's for sure. Those computers that we hold in our hands – our smartphones – keep us wired – literally and figuratively. We have instant access to almost everything, and so, as a result, we want things instantly – we never want to wait.

We don't want to wait in line, we don't want to wait on hold, we don't want to wait to have something we want, so we charge it, even if we don't have money to pay for it.

And our schedules – oh my! No peace there, either. I can't tell you the number of people I have talked to lately who are just exhausted because their schedules are packed to the gills.

In too many lives, there is no peace when it comes to relationships.

And in too many others, no peace because of the stress of living with too little – too little money, too little heat, too little food.

Put on top of all that, the lack of peace in the world. Oh, we live in such a fearful age – violence and terrorism happens so frequently that I fear we vacillate between being almost immune to it, to living with an undercurrent of fright running through us all the time.

A pastor named Janet Hunt faced a Christmas Eve one year with many of these feelings – fear, uncertainty, no peace running through her. It was her first time being away from her family for Christmas. She was serving in her first church after being ordained, and couldn't go home because of the worship schedule. Things had been crazy busy for weeks on end, she wrote endless sermons and preached them, and finally on Christmas Eve, after all of the services were over and she was dead tired and had just walked in her front door, the phone rang. It was someone letting her know that a member of her church was near death and could she please come and be with him?

Weary to the marrow of her bones, yet she got up, put her coat back on and went and sat with him and his wife for the next few hours, until he passed away. After spending a little more time with the wife, she got back in her car, drove home and did the only thing she knew would help her – she called her Mom. She just needed to hear the sound of her mother's voice.

Listen to what she said about the conversation: "I told Mom about my day. Perhaps I sounded sad. More than that, I imagine there was an edge of complaint in my tone for this was not how I had pictured Christmas at all. When I was finished, she very quietly said to me, 'But Janet, don't you think this is what Christmas Eve is for?'" (On-line, "What Christmas Eve is For?" Janet Hunt)

Wow! "Don't you think this is what Christmas Eve is for?" You know what, Janet's mom was absolutely right. Christmas Eve reminds us that God sent His son, the Prince of Peace, into a messy, messy world – back then, on the first Christmas, and today, on this one. And He does bring peace. No, the world has not been healed of its evil and messiness – but the peace Christ brings is the peace for you and me – the peace that fills us and envelops us and even empowers us to live in this messy world.

One author described the peace that Jesus brings like this: "It is a peace that can stand up under life's everyday pressures, stresses, and sorrow. It is a peace that can bring healing to families fraught with friction. It is a peace that can comfort and assuage even the most guilt-ridden soul. It is a peace that is not dependent on anything in this world – not money, not friends, not decorations, nothing in all this creation. The peace that endures even when all of life is crashing down on us, when our best laid plans have gone down the tubes again, when all seems to conspire against us. This peace (he concludes) is found not in this world but rather has come down from heaven – God's Christmas Peace." (On-line, "God's Christmas Peace")

It is the peace with which Jesus lived his life. The peace that, while the disciples were panicking during a storm at sea, allowed Jesus to sleep with no fear.

The peace that caused him not to join in the panic when the people told him Jairus' daughter had died – he knew better.

The peace that flowed through him as, on an evening on a mountainside when five thousand people needed to be fed, and there was no food – he knew there was a way, it would happen - God would make a way.

And the peace that allowed Him to stand before Pilate at the end of his days, with his life on the line, and stand quietly, silently, at peace - as he was falsely accused of things He did not commit and sentenced to death.

The peace that passes understanding – that's what Christmas Eve is for – that is the gift we receive on Christmas – peace. Receiving Jesus into our world, into our lives, into our hearts we receive peace.

My friends, the world will continue to be a messy place until that day when Christ comes again. Yet you and I can live in peace because He is with us even now.

And this is what that means.

It means that a young man who was critically ill, after hearing a surgeon say to him, "You have one chance in a hundred of coming through this surgery. Do you still want me to go ahead?" could reply, "Yes. Because if I come through this, my mom will be there to greet me when I wake up, and if I don't, Jesus will welcome me into heaven. So let's get on with it." (On-line, "Peace on Earth," Pastor Vince Gerhardy) Christmas peace!

It means that a wife with a still small child whose husband suddenly decided he didn't want to be married anymore, can face every new day, trusting that she will make it through, no matter how messy it gets. Christmas peace!

It means that all of us who have every right to live in fear every single day because of the threat of violence and terrorism, yet can get up every day and go out into that same world, because we believe that God will carry us through, and we will not let fear defeat us. Christmas peace!

And it means that Charles Rossiter, the pastor of Baldwin United Methodist Church, which was intentionally set on fire and completely destroyed a couple of Sundays ago, could write in a letter to me and others this week, these words: "In the days ahead we intend to keep following God

and replace our house of worship. We have lost so much in the destruction of Baldwin's building. This place of shared love and of memories will be rebuilt and new memories started and love again shared." Christmas peace!

Friends, the gift we receive from God Himself this night of nights is peace – peace to carry us through all that life brings our way, peace that dwells in us and peace that is with us all the days of our lives. There is no better gift for these times in which we live.

So, let me close with an image for you to think about. A man once wrote this: "When I was a little boy and would get afraid at night, I would run and jump in bed with my parents. I'd snuggle in between them both . . . my mom on my left and my dad on my right. With their huge bodies on either side, I felt perfectly calm and protected. Their strength comforted my fears. I knew they were bigger than anything in my nightmares." (On-line, "The Gift of Peace," Rev. Mark Adams)

Perhaps, on this night, you and I would do well to snuggle up in the manger with Jesus. With him, we can feel calm and protected. His strength can comfort our fears. He is bigger than anything in our nightmares. And best of all, His peace is ours tonight and all of our tomorrows, no matter what life brings.

So, my dear friends, receive the gift God offers to you this night! The peace of the Lord be with you all! Merry Christmas!

Amen.