

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Baby Names: Prince of Peace”

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The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2-7

On this final Sunday in Advent, we’re continuing our Advent series “Baby Names.” If you’ve been with us, for the past three weeks we’ve been looking at one passage in the Old Testament, one of the most common passages read around Christmas, Isaiah chapter nine. That chapter, that word of prophecy of a coming Messiah, includes four names given for a child, a son that was to come to deliver the people of God. You heard them a moment ago: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Each week in Advent we’ve looked at one of those names, asking what do they mean? What did they mean for Israel when they were written? What do they mean for us when we talk about how they talk about Jesus’ birth? What do they mean now?

As we’re now right up to the last Sunday before Christmas morning, we’re looking at the last of those names, “Prince of Peace,” and it might make you ask, is that really what we want? Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

William Wallace had gotten an overture for peace from the English king, but he had already gotten a taste of in his youth, and he didn’t like the way it looked then or now. This is all according to the movie *Braveheart* which is apparently nowhere close to historically accurate, but bear with me. Wallace was leading a Scottish uprising against the English and had had enough success that

the English king, Edward Longshanks, sued for peace, trying essentially to buy him off. But Wallace when he was a boy had witnessed what peace with this king looked like. When offered a chest of gold in exchange for his retreat and a truce, Wallace said, “The last time Longshanks spoke of peace I was a boy, and many Scottish nobles who would not be slaves were lured by him under a flag of truce into a barn, where he had them all hanged. I was very young, but I remember Longshanks’ notion of peace.” That was how he understood this offer of peace, and it didn’t sound good to him.

Wasn’t too far off in the ancient Roman world. When Jesus was born, it was during the rule of the Emperor Augustus and in the middle of what came to be known as the Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace, a 200-year period in which peace and prosperity flourished in the Roman Empire for all its subjects, if you believed the propaganda. But you take a closer look, and it wasn’t all that peaceful. Lots of wars during that time span, but the big difference was that those wars tended to take place on the fringes of the empire. There weren’t bloody, internal conflicts that threatened to tear the empire in two like there had been in the past, or like those that would happen in the future. There weren’t grave existential threats against the empire that shook the foundations of Roman power. So they called it peace, but even that peace operated by a different understanding.

A hundred and fifty years earlier, Rome had finished its third war against the North African city-state of Carthage. After a long siege, Rome breached the city walls and forced the Carthaginian leader to surrender, at which point they burned the city, killed or enslaved the population, and, so the story goes, sowed salt into the ground in and around the city so that nothing would grow and, symbolically, so that the city would not rise up again. Rome called that peace: when your subjects are so beaten down and decimated that resisting or rising again is simply impossible. That’s how they understood peace, and it didn’t sound good to those who lived under it.

Then about six hundred years before that, right around the time when this passage in Isaiah is thought to have been written, there was an Israelite king named Ahaz who also wanted peace. The northern part of Israel had split off and allied with another kingdom called Aram. Now the reason they made an alliance wasn’t because they hated Ahaz. It was because they were worried about an even greater threat to the north, the Assyrian Empire, which was turning into the largest, most powerful empire the world had ever seen, and they needed to stand together if they were to have a chance to resist them. And they wanted Ahaz to join them. Ahaz said no, so they attacked him.

While he’s under attack, who does Ahaz turn to for help? The Lord our God, the God of Israel, the God who had promised to uphold and deliver his people? No, not to him. He reaches out to the king of the Assyrians for help, the very power that had stirred this whole conflict in the first place. He allies with Assyria; Assyria comes and destroys Ahaz’s enemies, and just for good measure establishes Judah as a puppet state, forced to pay tribute and send men for the army. That’s what happened when a king of Israel looked for peace, or at least that’s what it looked like for Israel then.

You may have caught on to the not-so-subtle trend, whether it be in medieval Scotland, ancient Rome, or ancient Assyria, but peace, as it would seem in the pages of history, is a luxury of the powerful. If history is any guide, peace meant that you were strong enough or savvy enough or ruthless enough to crush anyone or anything that opposed you until they were unable to resist. Then and only then would you have peace.

And what did it mean to live under that peace, to be a subject in the rule of one of these “peaceful” reigns? It meant you were either a part of the powerful few, or it meant that you had been conquered and crushed, with any inkling of resistance driven out of you by force. So for you, the promise of peace, as you would’ve understood it, might not have sounded good to you.

So when you’re in the place of ancient Israel and you hear these words of Isaiah prophesying of a coming child who would be known as, of all things, the “Prince of Peace,” you’d almost have to wonder, is that really what we want? Or if you were in the place of Jews under Roman rule, and you’re looking for the promised Messiah who would bring “peace,” you might think, “Well, peace is what they say we have now, and it’s not too great for us.”

The point is, the prevailing notion of peace then and throughout much of history might not sound like a good set up if you weren’t the one holding the sword.

So why is it, when the notion of peace seemed so twisted, was this name for this anticipated child of “Prince of Peace” meant to be such a welcome comfort?

It could mean—and probably for a lot of people this is precisely what it did mean—that finally after centuries of oppression, of being thrown by the whims of other powers that always seemed to set the terms for peace, Israel would have a leader that would make them the ones who turned the tables on everyone else. Now Israel would be the ones who dictated things, squash opposition like the Romans, demand tribute and payment like the Assyrians. Finally, they would be the ones with power. And if you operated by these notions of peace in the ancient world, that’s what a “Prince of Peace” would give you.

What a disappointment Jesus turned out to be. All this promise, all this expectation, to be the one who would flip the script on all those who had kept Israel down, and finally the people of God would have the peace they were promised, with their enemies trampled underfoot, and what does Jesus do? He doesn’t do that at all.

You take a look at Jesus’s life and ministry, and “peace” isn’t really the word that comes to mind. Really, it seems like it’s just one conflict brewing after another. If it’s not angering some of the Jewish religious leaders, it’s poking the eye of the Roman authorities. If it’s not avoiding getting killed by a mob, it’s simmering tension among his own disciples. He even says at one point, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). If he’s trying to bring about peace, he’s going about it in all the wrong way.

But then he also tells his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

“Not as the world gives do I give to you,” he said. If there’s been a common thread for these four names given in Isaiah 9, it’s that when you think about it, Jesus didn’t fit the bill for any of them, at least not in the way he would’ve been expected to, but then he says, “Not as the world gives do I give to you.” Maybe the same thing goes for peace, and for his being the “Prince of Peace” for that matter: it doesn’t really come in the way the world would have you think it comes.

Because if what the world tells us has any truth to it, peace is what happens when you get what you want, and when everyone else who’s trying to get it gives up. That is, peace comes when you win and others lose. We might think that to be true, but not’s really what puts our hearts at rest.

We also might think that peace is when everything is resolved, when pain ceases, when misery ends, but if that’s what we’re waiting for, we might be waiting a long time.

This Advent, you may have noticed a series of short videos going up on our social media. Our Women’s Ministries are putting them together in place of our annual Advent by Candlelight event, and we’ve heard from Pastor Rachel, Eleanor Barron, Karen Lampley, and then later this week, my wife Frances will offer a word, and it just so happens that the topic of Frances’s video is peace.

The thing is, we recorded it last week, so I’ve already seen it, which means I get to take stuff from it and offer it to you like I thought of it first. Husband of the year right here. It’s her birthday today too by the way.

But one thing you’ll hear her share was this thought from another preacher, a guy named Fred Craddock, who talked about his own journey of faith. He said, “I first went because I thought, ‘Wherever Christ is, there is no misery.’ But now I realize, wherever there is misery, there Christ is.” I know, it’s a good one. We’re gonna get Frances up here preaching next time.

What it means is that Christ, in his coming, has turned on its head all our notions of what peace means. To us, peace might not mean something as drastic as hanging nobles in a barn or sowing salt in the earth or forcing an enemy to pay tribute, but more often than not peace by those terms is still a luxury of power, of victory, of getting what you want at the expense of others.

That’s the peace Christ gives. That’s not the kind of “prince of peace” he is. Instead of peace being something he gets by conquest, by taking from others, by enforcing his power, it’s instead something he gives through what we would call a defeat, by giving himself for others, by himself becoming powerless.

His peace comes not because he has magically dispelled any hardship, any difficulty, any misery but rather because, in living among us, in dying, and in rising again, he says, wherever there is hardship, wherever there is difficulty, wherever there is misery, there I am also, and there my peace comes as well.

Friends, this Christmas, you may be thinking of peace in the way the world defines it. You may be thinking peace will come when you’ve gotten what you want, surmounted every obstacle, recovered everything you’ve lost. You may think, once you get this next done, you’ll be able to rest, you’ll be able to have peace. But guess what? You won’t.

But hear the good news. Into this life of hardship, of difficulty, of misery and grief, has come who doesn't give as the world gives, peace by the world's terms, but rather peace by heavenly terms, a peace won by forgiveness not conquest, and that peace he offers to you this day as well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.