

"Not As the World Gives"

This morning the Hutto family lit the second candle of Advent: The Candle of "Peace." Peace is a word that comes very easily to our lips, especially at this time of year when Hallmark proclaims "Peace on Earth; Good Will to Men."

One of my favorite parts of Reader's Digest used to be "Toward More Picturesque Speech". Beautiful word pictures always made winter seem better than it really was.

"...the land drawing a white sheet up to its chin."

"...chimneys smoking their pipes..."

"...candy-cane icicles hanging from roof-tops..."

"...marshmallow icebergs floating in a sea of steaming cocoa..."

Those word pictures have a peaceful feel to me. But is that peace? Maybe the word glides too easily across our tongues; and dances too lightly into our ears.

When I was growing up, "Peace" meant "no quarreling." in the 18 years before I left for college, I never heard my parents quarrel; and my sister and I were never allowed to quarrel; never mind what was going on inside; and never mind the fact that we grew to adulthood, not knowing how to deal constructively with disagreement, and never learning to resolve differences. We just went to our rooms until we could "act nice toward one another." But, to my Mom [bless her heart!], that was peace.

I fear that for most people, that's about all peace means: a smooth surface that hides any turmoil or hostility beneath the sugar coating. We've all been to our share of meetings where the tension was so thick you could cut it; but the smiles were wide, the greetings energetic and the handshakes vigorous; because we lack an adequate concept of "Peace". It's a negative understanding. Even the dictionary defines peace by what it's **not**:

1. absence of war or other hostilities. 2. an agreement or treaty to end hostilities. 3. freedom from quarrels and disagreements; harmonious relationships. 4. public security and safety from harm; law and order. 5. free from strife.

Today's text gives a different perspective.

Israel and Judah were the remnants of a once great kingdom; their God had brought them up out of Egyptian slavery and gave them the Law and made them a people and a kingdom second to none. It always had been God's intention that they become a beacon to the world, reflecting God's presence and Glory so that all the world would be drawn to trust their God and would experience the wholeness—the salvation—the "Shalom" God intended and was prepared to give to the world.

But this kingdom fell victim to the very values of wealth and power it was called to overcome. The kingdom called to be a beacon of God's "wholeness", itself became divided, as the sons of Solomon fought for the throne. The various tribes took sides based, not on which one they believed best represented the Will of God, but based on which one they felt would give them what they wanted.

Nine northern tribes followed the rebel pretender and seceded. They called themselves, Israel, and established their capital in Samaria. Three tribes remained loyal to the lawful heir to the throne: Levi (the priestly tribe—they weren't going to

leave the temple!), Judah (the largest tribe and tribe of David and Solomon), and Benjamin (the smallest tribe, virtually helpless without Judah's protection). Those three were known as Judah, and maintained their capitol in Jerusalem. The two kingdoms remained seriously estranged for the remainder of their existence.

As we approach today's text, Assyria is growling at Egypt—again. Every time that happens, Syria and Israel get burned in the fallout. This time Israel decides to form an alliance with Syria against Assyria, and demands that Judah join the alliance. Ahaz, king of Judah, refuses, so Syria and Israel surround Jerusalem, intending to dethrone Ahaz and put one of their own people on the throne.

Enter the prophet, Isaiah. The scriptures record three encounters between Isaiah and Ahaz. In Isaiah seven the Lord sends Isaiah to the king to say, "Don't worry! You need not enter any political alliance against anyone else. Trust in God. These two nations whose armies now surround you will, themselves, be destroyed within a short time. But you have to trust in God."

Now, Ahaz already was on God's "naughty list" because he had participated in some of the pagan rituals of the cultures surrounding Judah. And he made things worse by ignoring what Isaiah said and sending an envoy to seek an alliance with Assyria against Israel and Syria (beginning to sound like a soap opera?). "Come get these guys off my back, and I'll be your servant." And he took gold and silver from the Temple to send as tribute money.

Again Isaiah is sent to the king to say, "Listen! If you're having a hard time trusting in God on this thing, ask for a sign. The Lord is going to deliver you from these armies that surround you. You don't need to enter alliances with other nations. God doesn't want you to enter alliances with other nations. Ask for a sign!"

But Ahaz spouts back a "Sunday School" response: "I'll not ask for a sign! I'll not put God to the test!"

But, you see, Isaiah already knows about the envoy in Assyria; he knows Ahaz is talking out of both sides of his mouth, and he lays into the king: "It's one thing to test my patience; now you're testing God's patience. O.K., if you won't ask for a sign, the Lord himself will give you a sign:

The young woman (you have just taken as your wife) is with child. Before that child has become old enough to know right from wrong, the two armies that surround Jerusalem will be destroyed. And when the child is weaned, you will remember this word, because those armies will be gone. This child will be the sign to you that "God is with us"—Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14-16 JLR)

And Isaiah went on his way. Ahaz continued the negotiations with Assyria, and the Assyrian armies destroyed both Syria and Israel.

When Damascus fell, King Ahaz went there to meet with the king of Assyria, took some more silver and gold from the Temple, as more tribute. While he was at Damascus, he was impressed with the size and style of the Assyrian altar to Dagan, so he went back to Jerusalem and sent his head architect to Damascus to study that altar so he could reproduce it in the Temple at Jerusalem, which he did.

That act triggered confrontation #3 between Isaiah and Ahaz: "Since you have turned your back on God and have reached out to Assyria, militarily and reli-

giously, the one to whom you have reached out will himself be destroyed." [Now, neither Ahaz nor Isaiah lived to see this prediction come true; but for even the casual observer, Assyria already was on the way out. The Babylonians already were moving in on much of Assyria's territory.]

Then Isaiah said, "Record the testimony; write it down." And he makes a few more comments, and we hear no more from Isaiah, himself. But those last comments have become some of the most important verses in scripture. In essence, he said, "The Assyrians—the ones you now are trusting—will fall; and without their protection you will be more vulnerable than ever. At that time Judah will have to trust in God, rather than in military alliances, or Judah also will fall. And there will be darkness on the earth; the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness. But in the days to come [here begins today's text], which Tony will read:

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.

³You 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.

⁴For 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.

⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶For 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.

⁷His 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 NRSV)

Later the prophet describes what life will be like under the reign of the "Prince of Peace":

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9 NIV)

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, wants more for his people than the absence of violence and hostility—more than an international treaty. Something positive is going on in this whole description; there is a presence—a positive force: "for the earth shall be full of the 'knowledge of the Lord' as the waters that cover the sea." Note: this is not "knowledge about the Lord". The prophet says it's "knowledge of the Lord." The semantics suggest personal, one-to-one knowledge. And there's another dimension: those relationships between the wolf and the lamb; the leopard and the kid; the calf and the lion; the cow and the bear.

What word comes to mind when you picture these unlikely comrades, lying side-by-side, eating straw instead of each other? To me, the word is "Trust". A key dimension to the biblical understanding of "Peace"—is the presence of "trust".

But what gives me comfort from this passage is this: it is directly into the condition of human strife and confusion and battle that God's promise of peace is directed.

And it is a peace that consumes and eliminates noise and hostility and conflict; a peace in which much later a writer of Scripture will say "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for these things are passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Another biblical writer calls it a "Peace that passes understanding." (Phil. 4:7)

It will be a positive presence, the very mention of whose name will calm a stormy sea and will cast out an epileptic demon.

It will be a peace that Jesus will offer, "not as the world gives," for it will be a peace that comes from, and indeed is, the presence of the one who is called, "Prince of Peace".