

In 1999, the biggest story during the Christmas season in the city of Chicago, Illinois was about how the baby Jesus figure had been stolen from the nativity scene in the open courtyard of the Richard J. Daley Center, the premier civic center of the city. Eventually the police recovered the baby at a bus station after an anonymous tip. The next day city workers secured the baby Jesus figure with a cord and a bolt and a padlock to the manger to prevent anybody from stealing it again. That did work - until 2004, when it happened again. This time it was a 19-year-old college student who was able to slip the baby out from underneath the cable. Two days later the law caught up with him. They returned Jesus back to the manger again - and upped the security measures by placing a team of people on site who are responsible for making sure that baby Jesus doesn't get stolen anymore. They are known as the God Squad and they are tight lipped about the security measures they've put in place. The goal of the team is to protect the baby Jesus from those who don't want his presence in the public square.

In many ways, this reflects the real event that occurred over 2,000 years ago when Jesus was born. While it is true that Luke 2:13-14 tells us that Jesus' entrance in the world was welcomed with a great multitude of angels who cried: *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased”* – we also read in Matthew 2:16 that when King Herod heard that Jesus has been born, he *“became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.”* These are the two opposing reactions we see towards Jesus from his birth until his death. The reality is, one could make the statement that Jesus is probably the most divisive person in all of human history. He's also the most misunderstood person in history as he is nothing like the popular cultural conception of him; not even close. The real Jesus is threatening. The Jesus of the gospels is not a figment of human imagination. Sinful, self-centered people don't make this stuff up.

When you read the Bible, you'll notice that Jesus was just as divisive in his own day as he is in ours. Everyone who encountered him had an opinion of or response to him; and it was never neutral. Even his closest followers were intimidated by him, and continually misunderstood him. Unlike the popular cultural conception of Jesus, he never said things people want to naturally hear. But to those who don't believe that Jesus is who he declared himself to be - God, Savior and Judge - he's some kind of lovey-dovey prophet who affirms everyone. This is well reflected in the controversial book written by Rob Bell called *“Love Wins”* – where Bell argues that everyone in the whole world will be saved. A strange argument to make if one actually reads the words of Jesus, who spoke of hell and judgment more than any other writer of Scripture. Best not to bring that uncomfortable, and divisive, fact up.

The reality is when Jesus speaks the truth, he causes division. In Matthew 10:34-39 Jesus crashed the party of the no sharp-edges, bubble-wrap, happy-clappy Jesus of our culture, when he said: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Jesus' words here reflect the divisive nature of the reality of the person and purpose of Jesus; which was initiated by the divisive actions of the first humans on earth, who rejected God and rebelled against God; which caused God to not only pass judgement on fallen humanity, but also promise to send a Savior into the world to pay for our sinful rebellion, ending our war with against God and restoring us back into the relationship with God we were created for.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” The word *“sword”* here is a metaphor for the inevitable division that will occur between those who put their faith and trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and those who do not, even within a family. Jesus' own family opposed him before they came to recognize his true identity. In the words that follow Jesus goes on to

demand unqualified allegiance to him. We will never know peace with God until our relationship with Jesus Christ takes precedence over every other human relationship.

In one Peanuts cartoon Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world!" Charlie says, "But I thought you had inner peace." Lucy replies, "I do have inner peace. But I still have outer obnoxiousness." This is our reality of our fallen life on earth in this fallen world. The question is often asked, "If you could choose what you want most in life, what would you ask for?" The most common answer is "Peace." We, as human beings created in the image of God, want peace – peace in our lives, our marriages, our families, our workplaces, our churches, our country, our world. Yet, taking a quick glance at all of these things in our lives and in our world, we see instead - busyness, brokenness, fear, division, hatred, rebellion, bitterness, anxiety, unsettledness.

The world will try offer us peace through various forms of escapism - drugs, alcohol, money, sex, status, possessions, positions, immoral relationships, recreation, entertainment – all sought through all forms of pleasure, self-satisfaction, rights, entitlement, and positive thinking. Many believe that peace is defined as the *absence of trouble* – and so they refuse to face the problems in their lives, believing they will find peace by sticking their heads in the sand. The world, however, has never held the answer to true peace. True peace comes not from man but from God. True peace means to be in harmony with God, to be bound, joined and woven together with God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. True peace also means to be assured of, confident of and secure in the love and care of God. There is a consciousness and a sure trust that God will provide, guide, strengthen, sustain, encourage, deliver and save completely those who seek Him with all their hearts. This supernatural peace must come first and foremost from surrendering our hearts and live to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and Lord.

This is the peace that is reflected in the Gentile or Nation's Candle that was lit on our Advent Wreath this morning. It represents the light given to the Wise Men who followed the star to the new-born King that revealed that Jesus came to offer salvation for all the nations of the world! This candle is a symbol of the peace with God that we receive when we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord! This is the day we rejoice in, the season we celebrate - when the Son of God, the promised Savior, came into the world to bring peace to our souls in our fallen, sinful rebellious war against God.

As we gather together to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ – we are looking this morning at the last of the four names that Isaiah proclaimed for the Messiah to come from Isaiah 9:6-7: "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" Over these past four weeks we have seen Jesus as our "*Wonderful Counselor*" – his birth was an act of God's will which caused a wonderful thing to happen because of God's steadfast love for His people, which He carried out according to His sovereign plan and divine purpose. We've also seen Jesus is our "*Mighty God*" in that God's promises have powerfully prevailed throughout all of human history. And we've seen that Jesus is our "*Everlasting Father*" who loves us with a Fatherly love that will not forsake us regardless of what who we are or what we have done. This morning we look at Jesus as the "*Prince of Peace.*"

It is an appropriate day to be looking at Jesus as our "*Prince of Peace*" – not only in light of that today we celebrate the birth of the One who would come to rescue us from our sin and restore us back to God – but also in light of the lack of peace we still see in the world today. Historian Lloyd Cory has said that "peace is the brief glorious moment in history when everybody stands around *reloading.*" Studies reveal that since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than 8% of the time; in the last of 3530 years of recorded history, there has been only 286 years of peace.

In his later years the infamous writer H.G. Wells wrote: "The time has come for me to reorganize my life, for it is *peace* for which I cry out. For some reason I cannot adjust my life in any way to secure any fruitful *peace*. Here I am at the age of sixty-four and I am still seeking *peace*. For me, *peace* is a hopeless, helpless dream." God's Word tells us that very first physical act of sin was an act of war against another human being

when Cain murdered Abel. Even today peace eludes God's people. When I was in Israel some years ago, I learned the common call among all there is "Pray for Peace in Jerusalem!" But there will never be true peace in Jerusalem until the "*Prince of Peace*" returns to that city. We read of that day in our text for today.

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.
It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." Isaiah 25:6-9*

The phrase "*Prince of Peace*" itself, in the original Hebrew is *sar-shalom*. The meaning of *sar* is "a leader or royal ruler." *Shalom* is a term which is familiar to most of us in that we associate it with the word "*peace*." While that is true to some extent, it's not the full blossom of the meaning of those words. As in most Hebrew words, *shalom* means much more than peace. *Shalom* is a completeness of contentment in mind; a state of quiet and tranquility of the soul. And it's a holistic life that seeks a complete state of peace in every corner of the heart, mind, and soul. *Shalom* does *not* mean the absence of conflict and struggle; *shalom* means having peace in the *midst* of conflict and struggle.

As long as we inhabit these bodies and walk this earth, we will know conflict and struggle, pain and suffering, affliction and heartache. Even if our hearts are in total surrender to Jesus Christ, the battle continues: *we are still sinners who live in a sinful world*. Even in submission to God's will, we still face the enticement and influence of sin; as Paul says in Ephesians 5:15-16: "*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.*" The problem with our understanding of this is that we tend to define "*evil*" in terms of what is happening in the world rather than what is happening in our own hearts. We do live in days of evil because the Kingdom of God has been replaced by the Kingdom of Self. We do live in days of evil because entitlement has replaced sacrifice. We do live in days of evil because cynicism has replaced humility, faith and trust.

We live in days of "evil" because the hearts and souls of men, women, and children still love people and things more than they love God. In the Garden of Eden the devil declared war against God – and our sin became his ammunition, our pride became his weapons, and our hearts became his battle-ground. Since that day sin has wrought great pain and untold destruction into countless lives throughout history. As we look at the condition of the world around us, with groaning throughout the natural world and the violence we see all around us - clearly we are still at war with God and with one another.

"*The days are evil.*" But this is nothing new; the days always have been "*evil*" from the very first sin. It was for that reason that Isaiah proclaimed the heart of God to bring peace into a world filled with war. From the moment the very first shot of sin was fired by the fallen human heart in our war against God - God promised that He would send one who would rescue, redeem and restore those who battle against Him. We are in the midst of the season of celebrating the coming of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace! That promise, that hope is before us today - in the midst of the war of life - Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the promised Savior of the world has defeated the enemy and declared victory and now reigns as the sovereign "*Prince of Peace*"!

Now the outcome of that war did look grim as Jesus was hammered to the cross and died an ugly, deeply painful death on a lonely hill at Calvary. But on the third day the general of the opposing army - Satan - was fatally shot, as the tomb Jesus was buried in was emptied of death and filled with the mercy, grace and love of the life of God. Those who surrender their hearts, lives and souls into the hands of the Savior are given peace in their war with God. But even in Christ, we still are at war – as we fight against the power of sin, evil

and death that is still in us and surrounds us and wounds us. You see the devil's ammunition – sin - can no longer kill us, But sin can still wound us. Satan will still battle against us. But even in the midst of battle, stand assured the war has been won! Jesus has defeated death and we will live forever! In Christ, victory is not just our hope; it is our rock-solid promise. What kind of peace does the “*Prince of Peace*” promise us? Our text for today tells us:

- 1) Jesus, as our Prince of Peace, will finally and fully satisfied all our deepest longings and yearnings: *“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well- aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.”*
- 2) Jesus, as our Prince of Peace, will remove from our hearts and lives all of the weight of the struggles, sufferings, pains and shame caused by sin: *“And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.”*
- 3) Jesus, our as Prince of Peace, will rescue us from eternal death, and give us a new life with him now and an eternal life with him forever and ever: *“He will swallow up death forever.”*
- 4) Jesus, as our Prince of Peace, will replace struggle and pain and sufferings and shame and death caused by sin from our hearts and lives - with joy in God: *“And the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

Though the word “*will*” in the phrase “*he will*” here is in the future tense in the English, the original Hebrew the word “*will*” here is in the “perfect mood” which means “it is a completed action.” What Isaiah is telling us here is that once Jesus came, these promises would be fulfilled. More than 700 years after Isaiah wrote this promise, it was fulfilled. On the day Jesus was born, the promises of spoken of Isaiah 25 became a *completed action*. On the day our Savior came into the world the “*Prince of Peace*” began to reign; *“It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

In hearing the Father's call for his life, Jesus – our “*Prince of Peace*” - came down to earth, grew in grace, obediently walked into the waters of baptism, healed the sick, cast out demons, preached the gospel, and challenged the spiritually arrogant of his day. As a result, they beat him and hammered his body to a cross where He was left to die. Under the weight of our sin Jesus' body did die - but by the power of the living God he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven – fulfilling the promise of God proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah - the completed action of God as promised.

Just before he died, Jesus cried out: *“It is finished!”* (John 19:30). From God's first promise in the Garden to his birth, from his death to his resurrection, from this day and on into eternity - Jesus is our fulfilled promise that our war against God is over! And while our battle against sin, evil and death is not completely over here on earth – we have a completed promise from God that we have victory! The “*Prince of Peace*” has arrived; the banquet *is* prepared; the covering of sin has been removed; death *has been* swallowed up; our tears and our reproach *have been* wiped away - and our battle cry is *“Behold, this is our Savior! He has arrived, we are saved! Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation!”*

The night before he went to the cross Jesus said: *“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:32-33). The peace we are promised in Jesus Christ is a peace that is not overwhelmed by adversity, overshadowed by fear or over weighted by guilt. The peace that Jesus gives us is not the absence of war, but rather the confidence that he is with us always, regardless of

trouble or trial. The “*Prince of Peace*” brings not the absence of danger but the overcoming presence of the living God through Jesus Christ even in the face of death. In the words of the great Puritan prayer: “I am not afraid to look the king of terrors in the face, for I know I shall be drawn, not driven, out of the world.” The great Charles Wesley once wrote:

In times of trouble I rest beneath the Almighty's shade, my griefs expire, my troubles cease;
Thou, Lord, on whom my soul is stayed, wilt keep me still in perfect peace.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” This is the day we rejoice in, the season we celebrate - when the Son of God, the promised Savior, came into the world to bring peace to our souls in our fallen, sinful rebellious war against God. In Christ, though the battle rages on, we know the war has been won. We celebrate his birth. We shamefully agonize over His brutal death. We glory in his risen life. He is our promise, our hope, our Jesus, our “*Prince of Peace*.”

Long ago a rich man sought to have an artist paint the perfect picture of peace. He could not find any that existed which satisfied, so he announced a contest to produce a masterpiece which would define peace. Both the challenge and the money stirred the imagination of many artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Finally the great day of revelation arrived. As judges uncovered one peaceful scene after another, viewers clapped and cheered. But as time went on none truly defined peace. The tensions grew. Only two pictures remained veiled. As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd. It was a picture of a mirror-smooth lake which reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of an evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed.

Surely this painting would be the winner. Anxiously the rich man with the vision uncovered the second painting himself, and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be the perfect picture of peace? It was a powerfully dark picture. A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; the crowd could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power. At the end of that branch, in an elbow, a little bird had built a nest. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcended all earthly turmoil. Ultimately this was the painting the judges and the rich visionary would choose to define peace. In 1555, Nicholas Ridley was burned at the stake as a martyr because of his public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. On the night before Ridley's execution, his brother offered to remain with him in the prison chamber to be of assistance and comfort. Nicholas declined the offer and replied that he meant to go to bed and sleep as quietly as ever he did in his life. With the Prince of Peace at his side, he slept well that night. On the next day with the Prince of Peace as his side, he stepped into heaven in a glory of flames. Because Ridley knew the peace of God, he could rest in the strength of the everlasting arms of his Lord and Savior to meet his every need in his times of his most need. While he sat in prison the apostle Paul wrote the words of Philippians 4:4-7: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

In the midst of the great persecution of the early church, a martyr for his faith in Jesus Christ wrote:

He began His ministry by being hungry, yet He is the Bread of Life.
Jesus ended His earthly ministry by being thirsty, yet He is the Living Water.
Jesus was weary, yet He is our rest. Jesus paid tribute, yet He is the King.
Jesus was accused of having a demon, yet He cast out demons.
Jesus wept, yet He wipes away our tears.

Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, yet He redeemed the world.
Jesus was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, yet He is the Good Shepherd.
Jesus died, yet by His death He destroyed the power of death.
Jesus came to make war with the world, yet He is our peace.

Jesus' birth fulfilled the promise of God to send a Savior to save us from our deadly sinful rebellion against God. His death and resurrection swallowed up death and promises us life - now and forever. Those who receive him will also receive his peace. In living in world filled with war – and as we so often feel our war against God in our own hearts – we praise God the “*Prince of Peace*” has come!

“*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” In our world and in our current political climate, it seems that there are more things that divide us than unite us. In the context of a culture the champions independence, rights and entitlements - our world is broken and split on just about everything. And worst of all, most of the rhetoric about such things is inherently divisive and ultimately results in anger, hatred and violence - and sadly, all sides of the isle are at fault. But Jesus was divisive because he was countercultural and his message was other-worldly. In Jesus' world, the kingdom of God - the way up is the way down. The way in is the way out. The way of strength is the way of weakness. The way of security is the way of vulnerability. The way of victory is the way of surrender. Want to be successful? Then serve. Want to get the most? Then give everything away. Want to be first? Then stand at the end of the line. Want to be free? Give complete control to God. Want to become great? Become less. Want to find yourself? Forget yourself. Want honor? Honor others. Angry at your enemies? Bless, love and pray for them. Want to know God's power? You will find it in your weaknesses. Want to know joy? It will come through suffering. Jesus also declared that to really be alive, we must die. And when we find our lives and love our lives, we will lose our lives - but when lose our lives for Jesus sake - we will find our lives and live forever. And if we do not deny ourselves, take Jesus' cross and follow Jesus - we are not worthy of him. The emergence of Jesus onto the horizon of history signaled that the divisive battle between the created image of God and the sin-induced nature within the heart of fallen humanity would be forced out into the open. Jesus' redemptive purpose to glorify God through his death and resurrection would signal the beginning of the end of a great spiritual war - which began in the Garden and was still being fought in the hearts and souls of all of mankind. Jesus Christ is the great continental divide of history. Prior to his appearance, all humans devised countless ways to fill the cross-shaped hole in their lives. That cross-shaped hole is now be filled with the Holy Spirit in those who put their faith in Jesus.

Yet, this message of Jesus is divisive because it goes against everything we have been taught, and everything we value. The ethic of the cross is counter-intuitive to our self-preservation, our self-centeredness, our self-worship, our self-promotion, our self-righteousness, our self-love - *and yet, it is the only way forward in our walk with God, as we follow Jesus*. If we are to live with him and for him, then we must die to all of our “selves” continually, every day. Jesus said that he came so that we may have abundant life, yet this life only came through his death. The most divisive part of Jesus' ministry was - *his love for sinners*. It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done - Jesus still died for our sins because he loves us. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:16-17). I pray that during this season the Spirit of God would pour himself into us, so we might die to ourselves, so we might take up our crosses and follow Jesus, so we might become divisive like Jesus – in our love for him and for each other and for those who are still at war with God; so they might come know Jesus, the Prince of Peace!

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Romans 5:1-11

"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

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