

“Real Peace”

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Isaiah 9.2-7 Luke 1.46-55

Imagining the Messiah Afresh

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Somewhere along in childhood, my youngest son, Jacob, who is now in his late 20's, got the idea that Kraft processed cheese, you know, the cheese that comes in individual slices wrapped in a plastic sleeve, the cheese whose only encounter with milk happened when the truck in which it was being carried from factory to grocery store passed some cows on a dairy farm--Jacob somehow got the idea that this processed cheese food was 'real cheese' and there was a period of several months when he was ten or eleven that when my wife or I went grocery shopping, Jacob would ask us to bring him some real cheese and then he would be upset when we returned home with a nice cheddar or muenster or gouda – whining that they were not “real cheese”! We kept explaining to him that there was a difference between real cheeses and the processed substance that he desired, but it was like talking to a wall.

This went on until one day when we all went to the grocery store together. As soon as we got inside the store Jacob disappeared, and five minutes later came marching up to us triumphantly, a huge smile on his face, a package of individually wrapped processed cheese food slices held high for all to see, he just stood silently in front of us, until we said, “What?” And Jacob exclaimed, “This is real cheese! I finally found where the real cheese is!” We again tried to explain that the substance he had fallen in love with, could not legally be called “real cheese”, but he refused to believe it!

Today, almost twenty years later, when Jacob and family come to visit us from Chicago, his mother usually has a package of “real cheese” in the refrigerator for him! You're probably wondering about now what processed cheese food could possibly have to do with the fourth Sunday in Advent. It's a fair question. I promise there is a connection!!

All Advent long we've been exploring the important titles that the Prophet Isaiah lifts up in chapter nine, verse six of the biblical book that bears his name...“Wonderful Counselor”, “Mighty God”, “Everlasting Father”, and, today, “Prince of Peace”. Isaiah probably originally offered these titles in relation to Israel's future king, the young Hezekiah, who had recently been born. But the church that grew in Jesus' wake, including this congregation, we have long viewed Isaiah's titles as descriptions for God's promised Messiah, as descriptions of Jesus. And today, as we explore the last of Isaiah's messianic titles – Prince of Peace – on this final Sunday of Advent...It is important for us to grasp that nature of the peace that God desires for Creation. It is important for us to have a sense of the real peace that the Messiah brings to the table.

For a correct understanding of the peace which Jesus offers is what we seek and is what we need...for the peace which Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brings to us, is the peace which makes all the difference! The peace which, a

king of Israel, like Hezekiah, is expected to supply during their rule, is almost a contradiction in terms. For on one hand, the peace which God intends for God's people is about wholeness and well-being – Shalom for everyone in Israel, not just the powerful elite.

God's intended peace is a frequent topic for Prophets like Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Hosea and Amos. In practice, however, the political desire in Israel was for a "Prince of Peace" king who was militarily strong...strong enough to impose a 'peaceful' disarmament on Israel's adversaries. Such peace, says my Old Testament teacher, Walter Brueggemann, ".....is not a peace made by negotiation or reconciliation. It is rather an imposition of peace by the winner." (p.55)

As practiced in ancient Israel, the Prince of Peace title is really more of a political slogan than a faithful reality. It is a hollow wish more than something that is actually expected to happen. The "real peace" of Ancient Israel is very much like the "real cheese" that my son is so fond of. It is a processed imitation of the wholeness and equality which God understands to be "real peace"; which, God expects those who rule and those who serve in God's name, to actually make happen for all God's people, and for all creation.

While Isaiah's use of the "Prince of Peace" title in reference to the future King Hezekiah seems like false advertising, or pie-in-the-sky wishing, Isaiah's offering up of this peace-filled expectation for those anointed by God to lead, does create an important future-focused possibility that we must not miss. For by having the "Prince of Peace" title available in print, within the prophetic tradition of Israel...this important title is there just waiting for the right moment in time, just waiting for the right person so that when Jesus comes along many, many generations later, with his faithfully deep and imaginative understanding of God's desires for God's people, Jesus is able to pick up the title Isaiah left lying around so many generations before.

Jesus embraces the expectation that God's anointed, God's Messiah will bring a peace-filled vision of an alternative society in an alternative world. Jesus embraces the expectation that God's anointed will make real a sense of peace that is not just lip service to an ideal and is instead a peaceful alternative to the way things are usually done. Jesus embraces for himself, as God's Messiah, the establishing of a peaceful existence for all of Creation that is real and sustainable and transformative and life-creating.

This is the kind of peace which Jesus both proclaimed and practiced--the kind of peace which his disciples everywhere--disciples like us-- are invited to proclaim and practice all the time. This is the kind of peace that is not just lip service to God's expectations for us. It is instead a "Real Peace" that is a permanent part of our spiritual DNA, shaping and guiding who we are and how we are disciples of Jesus!

This "Real Peace" we are called to practice and expected to practice, is beautifully described for us in today's Gospel lesson, which is often called Mary's Magnificat! In this great proclamation of God's love, Mary announces that "Real Peace" is all about treating people justly and equally...all about ensuring that all people everywhere have enough resources to live rather than just survive...resources like enough health care to feel and be safe...resources like experiencing enough compassion in life, that everyone has grace to share with

others...and solidly tangible resources, like food and shelter and access to clean water, and good education, and psychological care and safe public places..... all those things that bring such rich meaning to our lives.....ll those things that make our lives possible!

We are charged today to make the “Real Peace” of Jesus more than empty words and gestures, and so, I think that this holy work is the perfect spiritual homework in this Season of Advent. It is the perfect spiritual homework for us today and tomorrow and forever. A week away from celebrating Jesus’ birth, in a world and in a country that is enamored by the practice of peace through power..... we disciples of Jesus have a heavy and important task before us in promoting and living Jesus’ way of “Real Peace”. And we must remember that despite the heaviness, the way of peace we celebrate in Jesus is one of hope and fresh possibilities!

Christmas is our reminder both of what God gives us, and what God expects from us. May we pay attention this week. May we be transformed afresh this week. May we be makers and leaders of “Real Peace” this week and forevermore! Amen!!!

Walter Brueggemann, Names For The Messiah