

“Peace: Heavenly Politics”

Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

December 18th 2016

Rev. Dr. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Peace is a political term. It assumes that there is a counterpart as an opponent. We may feel threatened by other groups or by violent power. When we say, “we are at peace”, it simply means the state of feeling free from distress or hostility and we experience no fear or violence. Peace occurs when power is balanced between me and opponent or at least my power to cope with conflict or crisis. In our Christian tradition, Jesus Christ as our Anointed One is called the “Prince of Peace” in the book of Isaiah 9:6. And in the Gospels, Jesus, our Messiah is described as the messiah who will guide us into the path of peace. We are in the last Sunday of Advent. This morning, I invite all of us to reflect on the meaning of peace, especially in our Christian faith, what it means to own peace in Jesus, especially in understanding of “Emmanuel” as we anticipate the birth of Christ Jesus coming to us as “prince of peace”.

Every Sunday, we share our Christian greetings, “The Peace of Christ be with you”, and sing “Shalom to you!” as we leave each other. Our hope is that we have wholeness and peace not only for ourselves, but also for the entire world. The Apostle Paul encouraged Colossians, who were under spiritual challenges, to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts. He also reminded them that they were called to be one body in Christ and to be thankful. (Colossians 3:15) Peace is an essential value that we Christians seek to achieve in our spiritual practices. What is it?

After the November presidential election, it seems to be obvious that our country is noticeably divided into two sides either for President elect or anti-Donald Trump. Some people are feeling angry, anxious or fearful. The world is not coming to an end yet! People want to talk about politics. Being involved in political discussions, it can be controversial for you as well as for your listener, usually it doesn't result in a peaceful conversation. I don't mean to underestimate the importance of politics. But I notice that people are not peaceful while talking about politics. Why? Because we can't find peace in us and we feel powerless and helpless in dealing with powerful political regime. Even Jesus reminds us in Matthew 10:34, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Why did Jesus speak about two contrary themes in his words?

A couple of nights ago, Youngaje, my wife asked me why I do not preach about current political matters because people might want to hear a relevant message from a spiritual perspective. She said that my sermons have been sounding more like a Catholic priest's message. I gave her two answers: First, people are already tired of political talks with their friends and family. They don't need more information, rather they need healing, rest and to find peace in their hearts when they come to church. Secondly, I don't know much about politics. In my capacity, I can't give them the political peace that they want, but I can give them a different peace that Jesus wants to offer. Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27 NRSV)"

What kind of peace did God give to each of us through his son Jesus Christ? It is the peace that will strengthen you and your souls so that your hearts will neither be troubled nor afraid in dealing with your life's challenges. It is like a special place that you have in your soul where you find security and safety. Last Thursday, the weather was terrible. Due to heavy rain and strong wind, I saw trees and branches swinging right to left like a pendulum. I tried to open my umbrella, but it was too hard to hold. But when I came to the library for our Centering prayer meeting, I felt cozy and warm inside. Outside, there was still stormy. Have you ever experienced this type of difference? This is a great analogy of the peace that I am sharing with you this morning.

Secular politics intrinsically takes over the power to govern people's lives. This influences society using legal and political powers. I don't care who becomes the president. What I am mostly concerned about is that the ultimate goal is to bring freedom, justice with fairness for everyone and especially care for the poor and the underprivileged in our society. This is what secular politics should bring for peace. But God's peace is different from secular politics. In order to bring the divine peace, God decided to send His only son to us. In other words, God chose to give His power to us.

Today's Scripture readings have a common centering point. That is 'Immanuel. Immanuel, the incarnate, is the expression of God's divine peace for us. The principle of spiritual power is different from secular politics. Politicians gain power from elections but in the spiritual world, God humbles himself. Divine peace is not achieved by gaining power. Rather God gave his power away to be with us. *This* is heavenly politics! "Immanuel-the divine presence in us" is a political expression for solidarity between God and his people, especially for the weary, the humble and the poor. When we are weak, weary and sometimes in crisis in life, God promises to be with us and strengthen us. If

you look at Israel history from a World history perspective, the small Jewish tribe had never been a strong and powerful nation. The Bible tells us that Israel always had been defeated, destroyed and captivated by great and powerful nations. The whole point is that God restored and rebuilt Israel through His divine presence which is Immanuel when they were helpless, hopeless and powerless. Today's story is also part of Israel's crisis. The prophet Isaiah delivered God's message to the Israelites. It was "Immanuel".

The New Testament story is also about God's solidarity with a young couple, Joseph and Mary. The angel Gabriel, God's messenger appeared to Joseph in a dream and said that his fiancé Mary will conceive and bear a son. He was told to name his son as "Emmanuel". (Romanized Hebrew name) This message of Immanuel (the Hebrew name) is not only for Joseph and Mary, but also for all of us who feel for his situation. How do we understand God's incarnation and 'Immanuel' to a teenager couple who weren't married yet about their uncertain future? The promise of Immanuel is the message of hope to those who are anxious, uneasy and fearful and those who can't find peace in their souls and hearts. Ironically, Immanuel is an expression of God's compassion, solidarity and justice to those who seek the divine peace and security.

God simply promises us that "I will never leave you alone." and "I will be with you from now on." As the angel Gabriel spoke to Joseph, God speaks to each of us the same message, "Do not be afraid." "I will be with you always." If you can't find hope and peace in the presidential election, find the divine peace in Jesus, Immanuel God. In this beautiful season of Advent, I pray that we remember this promise in your hearts. The visible promise of divine peace is coming in the birth of the baby in this holy season. Therefore, be strong and bold by receiving God's peace in your hearts. The gift of peace is on the way. Amen.