



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 18, 2016
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
COMPLETELY FOREVER: CHANGED BY THE COMING OF CHRIST

Completely Forever: Peace, God's Highest Glory Zephaniah 3:14-20; Matthew 1:18-25

The fires in the village had long burned down to embers before Joseph finally fell asleep. When the sun set and the moon rose, he lay down like everyone else in his family, but he could not sleep. His mind was a tempest of thoughts and his heart a whirlwind of emotions. After a while he got up and stepped over a couple of his brothers to get outside. He walked the short distance to the rough square of stones that outlined what was to be his house. "My house . . . and Mary's," he thought with a mixture of anger and sadness. He walked through what might have become a doorway and dropped down wearily, his back against the back wall that was now three feet high.

"Our house . . . where we would dream our dreams . . . and raise our children," he thought with hopeless disgust. Then a wave of regret caused him to shudder and his chest ached with sadness. "Why, Mary, Why?" he whispered to the night. "How . . . could . . . you?" he sobbed. Just that morning, while he was adding a few stones to the south wall, Mary had surprised him with a visit. She was extremely nervous but happy. Her face seemed to glow, but he could tell something troubled her. Then she told him that ridiculous story about an angel appearing to her, telling her she was with child when they had not even sealed their marriage. She confirmed that she was expecting and then made up more of the story that the child was of the Spirit of God as if Joseph did not know how children came to be. Did she think he was gullible enough to believe another man's child was actually from God? He lost his temper. He accused her of betrayal and infidelity and trying to use him and God to save face. She begged him to listen, but he would hear no more. He conceded that he would not embarrass her in the village. She could go off into the hill country to visit relatives and he would halt the marriage quietly. She had broken his heart and he did not want to see her again. He walked away and left her standing where he now sat, sobbing.

He knew he had done the right thing. No man would stand for behavior like hers. No man would raise someone else's child as his own and pretend it was his. No man would allow his bride-to-be to deceive him this way. What would the rest of their life be like? He sat and cried out his rage.

Soon, his tears spilled out his sorrow. He did love Mary. For years, it seemed, they had both dreamed of a life together. Since their engagement they had talked about their home, their future, their children . . . THEIR children, not someone else's! He missed her already. He ached over what had happened. He felt empty. He had lost part of himself.

He sat slumped against the wall for a long time. The fires burned low as did his spirits. Some time not long before dawn, exhaustion overtook him and he slept. He dreamed, and in his dream a messenger from God visited him. This angel told him exactly what Mary had told him. She would have a child who would be of God. They were to name him Jesus. He would save his people from their sins. He had no reason to be afraid.

Joseph woke with a shudder. The sun had not yet topped the trees on the other side of the sea, but a shadowy light allowed him to see shapes around him. He saw the rough outline of his house . . . his and Mary's house! He jumped over the low wall and began running toward her family's home. He felt whole again. He must see Mary. He must apologize and ask her forgiveness. He must marry the one he loved and raise their child and enjoy the gift of their union.

What if that angel had not made his way into Joseph's dreams? What if he had gone to the wrong village, tapped into the wrong head? Spoken to the wrong person? Silly questions, I know, but the importance of the angel to this story is unmistakable because he is the messenger of peace. He finds Joseph in turmoil, his life upended, his heart broken. He brings peace to Joseph. He speaks a word that heals what was wounded, it repairs what was broken, brings wholeness to Mary and Joseph and their families. He brings peace that will eventually affect their entire world. Joseph wanted to wed Mary. He loved her. She had become a part of him and without her, Joseph was less than the person he wanted to be. It sounded corny in the movie Jerry Maguire and its sounds corny now, but Mary completed Joseph and he completed her. Jesus completed them both . . . and us all.

The angel told Joseph what he wanted to hear, what he needed to hear: "It's okay to wed Mary. This whole thing is of God. It will be okay. Marry her!" And so he did. And the Prince of Peace was born.

Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we tend to think of peace as something we win with war or, at least, the threat of war. We associate peace with harmony, at least to the extent that other people are in harmony with the way we think and feel. We associate peace with prosperity, at least to the extent that we

are prosperous even if other people are not. We associate peace with an absence of conflict or violence, at least in my neighborhood or community or nation even if other places are embattled in one way or another. Although there are many ways in which the word peace is used in scripture, when it comes to Jesus, peace most often refers to completeness or wholeness--becoming who God intends for us to be. The peace of Christ is what poet John Byrom called, "God's highest glory."¹

Joseph and Mary were able to become who God wanted them to be because the message delivered by the angel changed their perspective on who they were. They held onto their trust and love for each other and brought Jesus into our world. They were told there was no need to fear for God was in the midst of what was happening, and they believed it. But life was not peaceful in the sense we often desire. There was that long trip to Bethlehem, the birth under less than perfect circumstances, and the subsequent threat to their son's life. No doubt there were persistent rumors swirling around Nazareth that dogged them and their son for years. But Joseph and Mary were at peace. They were united. They were complete. They were at peace.

They heard the message of the angel, a message that comes to us today: Don't be afraid. Peace is coming into your world. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be afraid to share it. Be a peacemaker.

For some reason, when we read the stories of Jesus, we tend to treat them as if they are themselves prophesy rather than the fulfillment of prophesy. "Unto you a child is born" is not a message for the future; it is the glad announcement of what has already happened. In the same way, when Jesus told his followers, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God," he was not dreaming of a day to come. He was talking about then and there as well as here and now. God has already claimed us as his children; therefore, we should already be about the business of making peace, of bringing people into harmonious relationships with God, with themselves, with one another.

"How do we do that?" you might ask. How do we help other people becoming the person God wants them to be? Glenn Hinson suggests that we find a person who is difficult to like, someone who does not fit our definition of "one of us," someone who makes liking them a challenge and then "do something kind and thoughtful for her or him for the next week or so."² He

¹John Byrom, "A Hymn for Christmas Day," *Classic Hymn & Carols*, John Betjeman, ed. (London: Batsford, 2012), 168.

²E. Glenn Hinson, "On Being 'God's Pencil,'" *Weavings* (November/December 1998): 37.

cites an occasion when Thérèse of Lisieux, also known as "the Little Flower," a French nun from the 19th century, tried this approach. In the convent where she and many other nuns served, there was

a sister whom none of the sisters could stand. It was hard, for this sister was "very disagreeable" to everyone, including Thérèse. Thérèse had to summon up a lot of extra energy to do it, but every day she stopped the old sister to say something nice to her, brought her some flowers, gave her her best smile, and in general did for her what she "would do for any person I loved the most." Little by little, the formerly unhappy and unpleasant woman's personality began to change. One day she hailed Thérèse and asked, "Would you tell me, Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus, what attracts you so much towards me; every time you look at me, I see you smile?"³

Hinson comments, "God's love can work through frail and fragile human instruments as no amount of cleverness can do the things that make for peace."⁴

We are frail and fragile. That is why we need one another for strength and stability. When we unite rather than divide, we are stronger and more stable. We feel secure and at peace. It is when we are fragmented and incomplete, when we are insecure, that we are not at peace with ourselves or one another. Our insecurity causes us to grab for security in things that cannot offer us peace: power, possessions, wealth, control. We become like Pharaoh who had all the wealth in the land of Egypt but it was not enough. He had to have the people as well and they became slaves to his insecurity.

When Jesus comes, however, our insecurity is banished. We are made whole at last, and peace is our true gift. With peace comes a change in life—for us and for everyone.

Imagine what would happen if we began to live the prayer of Martin Luther King, Jr. to judge one another, not by the color of our skin, the pedigree on our birth certificate, the corner of the earth in which we were born, or the manner in which we practice our faith, but rather by the content of our character.

³Thérèse of Lisieux, "Letter to Mother Marie de Gonzague," June 1897, in *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clark, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), pp. 222-23; as cited in Hinson, 37.

⁴Hinson, 37.

Imagine what would happen if greed did not drive our economy but rather generosity, pride, creativity, and craftsmanship.

Imagine our lives if we were not so concerned with ourselves that we tried to climb the ladder by stepping on and over other people but rather helped one another reach higher and further.

Imagine if we cared less about power and more about justice.

Imagine if we discovered that other people do truly complete us and realized our need for one another instead of fragmenting one another further by tearing one another down.

What would it be like to lie down at night and close your eyes in peace, finally feeling complete and whole?

Each year at this time we hear Isaiah's prophesy of peace. How we have prayed that Isaiah's vision would at last become reality! How we have yearned for a change of heart, not in nature, but in the nature of humanity! How we have hoped for peace to come to our world at last. We have to recognize, however, that the gift is already here and that the power of peace pulses within and among us. We have to understand that we are the wolf who must lie down with the lamb. We are the cow who must feed beside the bear and allow our young to play together. We are the leopard who must graze beside the goat and the lion who must learn to eat straw. And we are the ones who must learn to be led, not by the powers on which we depend, but by the peace of the Christ Child. Whoever those people are whom we believe are our "natural born enemies" must become our dinner guests. Peacemaking begins with us.

The coming of Christ changes our peace from temporary cease-fires and passive-aggressive attacks to reconciliation and cooperation. The coming of Christ brings integrity into our lives so that what we say and believe and hope for and do are one and the same. The coming of Christ heals our wounds so that we can bring healing to one another. The coming of Christ brought two people together who loved one another. The coming of Christ brought God and the world together again. The coming of Christ brings us peace which can heal and make us whole again. The coming of Christ can heal our families, our community, our nation, our world. The coming of Christ invites us to become peace-receivers and peacemakers. We have no need to be afraid because the peace of Christ changes us forever . . . completely forever. Amen.

December 18, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We hear Isaiah's prophesy once again and pray for it to become reality. The music swirls the hope around and within us and we believe in its possibility, but we doubt its reality. Forgive us our lack of confidence in your power to change the world, O God. Speak this good word to us once again and help us to believe.

We do pray for peace in our world, not only in far away lands where bombs fall and people die, but in our own community where bullets fly and people die. We pray for peace among neighbors who once were friends, among citizens who once were united, among leaders who were elected to serve us all. We pray for peace that will discover the creative resources within each of us and put aside the illusion that power alone will meet our needs. We pray for peace which results in wholeness instead of division and which brings healing instead of hurt.

Grant us all peace, O God, so that we might enjoy the redeeming love that flows to us especially at this time of year. Grant us peace that patches the holes in our heart from which goodwill and kindness seep away. Grant us peace that rediscovers the joy which can carry us through each and every day.

We thank you, O God, that in the midst of our struggles, you are with us. We thank you for the care you bring, the love you offer, the peace which is ours. We thank you that Christ continues to be reborn within us and brings us new life day by day. Open our ears, our minds, our hearts to hear and receive your glorious song once again; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.