

“The Church in Advent: At Peace”—Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

In a world where there is so much strife, so much darkness, so much evil, is it possible to find peace?

The strife, the darkness, the evil is so prevalent that it seems hardly necessary to rehearse it here—it’s in our face all the time. Besides, we don’t really have the time! But, to answer the question, I believe that, for us as the Church of the Lord Jesus, the answer is yes, we can be at peace, because the One who is the Lord of the Church is the One of peace.

Now, let’s remember that we use the word “peace” a little differently—actually, a lot differently—than the world uses it. For everyone else, “peace” is an absence of open hostility—if we’re not inflicting pain on one another, whether it’s physical pain or emotional pain or spiritual pain, we’re at peace. But, for God’s people, “peace” runs so much deeper. We use the one word “peace” to translate a Hebrew word, *shalom*, but the true meaning of *shalom* is the sense of well-being that comes from being in a right relationship with God. “Peace” for us is that sense that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is in control, that his will is being worked out, and that, in the end, as Julian of Norwich wrote, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

But it’s peace that, try as we might, we cannot create for ourselves, for it is *God’s* peace—it is God’s gift to us, and the only way we can have it is to accept it and live into it and seek to grow it in a world so torn with strife and darkness and evil.

So we begin by accepting God's peace, and we accept God's peace by accepting the gift of love God has given us in the Prince of Peace. What we celebrate in these days is God's coming into the world of strife and darkness and evil as one of us, to overcome the strife and darkness and evil, not with the love of power, but with the power of love. This God who came into the world as one of us grew up as one of us, taught us what it means to live in his kingdom, showed us what it means to live in his kingdom, and then, in a remarkable turning of the tables, used the strife and darkness and evil of this world to overcome them. He turned the terrible instrument of his death into the sign and symbol of love that overcomes strife and darkness and evil, and he turned the tomb representing the ultimate darkness of death into an empty place that is our sign and symbol of his victory over death.

It's all this that God, in his Holy Spirit, invites us to buy into, not just with our thoughts, not just with our words, but with our very lives. For that *shalom* God wants to give us is about more than escaping eternal condemnation and getting into heaven—it's about more than the hereafter. It's about intentionally living in his way and living out his will in the here-and-now. It's about our deciding intentionally that Jesus is both Lord and Savior, that he is the One who is going to control all that we are and all that we have. It's about saying that Jesus is in charge of every aspect of our lives—every relationship, all our time, all our talents, all of our resources, and, yes, even all our finances. For it's only when Jesus is really in charge that we can have that peace of God—that *shalom*—that passes all understanding.

Yet this doesn't happen instantly or magically—because we find it difficult to surrender control of our lives to anyone, much less the Lord Jesus. Instead of hearts of peace, we have hearts of war—hearts that want to dominate and hurt others. There are a whole bunch of reasons why we have hearts of war, and, once again, we don't have the time to go into all that. What we can say is that if *shalom* is a gift of God, then it's the God who gifts us with *shalom* who helps us to appropriate that gift. It's God who, through his Holy Spirit, makes us aware of our hearts of war. It's God who, through his Holy Spirit, makes us realize that we can't have hearts of war and be followers of the Prince of Peace. It's God who, through his Holy Spirit, leads us to give over our hearts of war to Jesus. And it's God who, through his Holy Spirit, helps us to live in the way of Jesus—the way of the Prince of Peace.

But this life of peace isn't meant to be lived in isolation—the people of peace are meant to live together in a *community* of peace. The people of *shalom* are called to live together in a community of *shalom*. We have a name for that community—we call it the Church. Now, I'll grant you that strife and darkness and even evil can exist within the community of faith as much as it exists in the world,

in our nation, in the community, and in our lives, because we bring our hearts of war into the life of the community of peace. It always pains my heart when I hear about strife within any community of faith. But when we allow the Prince of Peace to be the Lord of the faith community, there is peace: there is *shalom*. Does that mean that there will always be complete harmony, with no disagreements about anything? Of course not—but I’ve found that people of good conscience and Christian character can hold differing opinions; that there are always ways to amicably settle disagreements; and that, in the end, it is possible to agree to disagree and not be disagreeable. Peace can be real in the community of faith when *Jesus* is in charge.

Yet this peace—this *shalom*—is not something we can keep to ourselves: it’s meant to be shared. We, as the people who follow the Prince of Peace, are called to share this *shalom* in the community and the world. We’re called to tell others about the forgiveness of sin and the new life that can theirs if they accept the gift of love God offers us in his Son—peace can be theirs if they’ll open themselves to the Prince of Peace. As the community of peace, we’re called to do all we can to alleviate the situations and circumstances that keep people from being at peace—hunger, poverty, prejudice, whatever—all those things that keep people struggling, that keep people from becoming all God intended them to be, all the strife and darkness and evil that are rampant in this world. It’s a monumental task, to be sure, and it’s one we will never accomplish completely. Yet we’re called to do the very best we can, believing that one day, the Prince of Peace will return to rule and reign over all creation, and all the strife, all the darkness, all the evil will exist no more. In the meantime, we as the people of peace are inspired and empowered by God’s Holy Spirit to do all we can to make God’s peace—God’s *shalom*—real in the community and the world, remembering that Jesus the Prince of Peace said, “Blessed are the *peacemakers*...”

So, yes, in a world of strife and darkness and evil, it is possible to find peace—but it’s not peace of our own making. It’s peace that comes from the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ the Son of God. And as his people, as his Church in Advent, we can truly be at peace. Thanks be to God!