

Welcome here this beautiful sunny, Sunday morning. If you are new or are visiting with us, a double welcome to you. This morning is special to us because our Saturday evening service, Lighthouse, has joined us this morning. A welcome to all of you as well!

This morning we have lit the fourth advent candle. Advent is something that Christians around the world celebrate. From dictionary.com we find that Advent has three different definitions.

The first is "a coming into place, view, or being; arrival:".

The second is "the coming of Christ into the world."

And the third is "the period beginning four Sundays before Christmas, observed in commemoration of the coming of Christ into the world."

Basically Advent is the celebration of Jesus's first coming, and the longing anticipation of his return. It is the realization that Jesus has come, and he has changed our world. For many of us, he has radically transformed our lives. Life is good because Jesus came.

But it is also the realization that life is still hard, and there is still a lot of pain and suffering in our world. This is no surprise to any of you, its no surprise to me. Over the past two weeks I have been to the hospital for two different youths. The world is not as it should be, it isn't full and complete, but instead we see brokenness all around us.

And I will repeat what Pastor Dan has said before. It is sometimes easier, in the midst of the pain and suffering that surrounds us, to be stuck in it, to accept it, to put our heads down and push through it all, attempting to walk through life with as little damage as possible. It is as though we put blinders on, and we forget about what is coming.

Because we know that Jesus is coming again! In Hebrews it says "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

So we have Jesus. He has come, and his Kingdom is here! His Spirit is here among us, but his Kingdom is also not yet! There is a completion coming. There is a fullness to the Kingdom that is on its way, so we must not forget that. We cannot become comfortable with now, but we must long for the return of Jesus. This is when we will see the Kingdom in all of its colours.

As we celebrate Advent, we focus in on different gifts that come with the gift of Jesus. We see what the good news of Jesus means for us, both in the present and in the future.

The first week we celebrated Hope. We saw that Jesus' birth as a baby and death and resurrection brings us hope now. There is a reason to live, a reason to move forward, and a hope for our lives. But we also have hope for the future. We can place our hope on the fact that

Jesus is coming back again and will establish his Kingdom in power, creating a new heaven and new earth.

The second week we celebrated love. We remembered that God displayed his great love for us in sending his son to earth, to live life as a human and to die in our place, but we also see that God continues to love us by giving us his Spirit, and that he will return again.

The third week we celebrated Joy. We relished in the fact that God has given us his son, and this allows us to be joyful. We are called to be joyful in Jesus, now and for eternity. God is a God of great joy!

And this week we are celebrating, enjoying and looking forward to the peace that God gives.

Let's pray before I continue.

Pray

I am really excited about this one, because of all the things I pray for when I pray for people, it is peace.

It's peace.

I have come to realize over the last while that one of the things that our society, our neighbors, our co-workers, our friends, our family so desperately searches for is peace.

The world wants peace so much, because turmoil and strife is exhausting. It leaves you anxious, scared, agitated, leaves you in pain, it divides.

Over this past year I have spoken with several people, most of them youth, about life, as they wanted to end theirs. For so many, a lack of peace in their lives had pushed them to a point where the only place they could find it was in death.

According to Time magazine, the amount of kids being hospitalized for thoughts of suicide or attempted suicides has doubled in under a decade. This information is out of the States, but having worked in Youth Ministry now for some time, I can say that we have a very similar problem.

Our world is so desperately hoping for peace. But the great news is that Jesus came! And he brought peace, he offers peace, and he is bringing peace!

The world needs peace. And the world needs Jesus. But for so many, they do not know it yet. But lets look at our teaching passage, and then we might have a better way to show this peace to those around us.

Luke 2:1-20 is our passage.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

"... and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

This is the line, the thing, the moment that the Jewish people had been waiting hundreds of years for. God's promised saviour had come, and he was bringing a Kingdom of peace.

Let's unpack what that would have looked like. In the Old Testament, the name for peace was shalom. Shalom in the Old Testament signified the salvation that God would bring for his created world. (Eerdmans) But it also meant fullness or completeness. When something was full of shalom, there was nothing missing, things were as they are meant to be, as God would have them. (Douglas)

So shalom was used as a greeting, to wish wellness and fulfillment on a person's life or someone's family. But it was also used in prayer, that people would live in unity with one another, it was a prayer against strife.

This peace only comes through God, and this was the hope of the Jews, that there would be a Messiah that would bring a time of shalom.

Then there is the Greek word for peace which was used in the New Testament, which was *eirene*, which almost always carried a spiritual tone. It really connected with words such as righteousness, grace and life.

This means that the term peace in Luke 2 would have carried all of this. And the Jewish people have been waiting...

But here is what is going on historically. The Jews are living under Roman rule, but there is a lot of Greek influence. For roughly 400 years they have been under the power of different people, without land to call their own. They essentially feel as though they are in exile again. They feel the punishment of God, and they long for liberation.

While overall there is relative peace because the Romans control nearly everything, there is also unrest because of their local ruler. Herod, the king of the Jews was known as one of the most brutal rulers of the period. He had a great insecurity, and so he was always watching his back, to make sure that he would hold on to his throne. He was placed in power by Rome after his father was murdered. (Pfeiffer)

Having such a low sense of security, Herod decided to make a name for himself by ordering the construction of absolute architectural and engineering masterpieces. He began to rebuild the temple, and planned on making it way nicer than the previous temple. He wanted to make a mark in history. He also knew that a port would bring in great economic power, and so he created the largest man-made port. (Tyson)

So taxes were outrageously high. The local people would work so hard, and give most of their earnings to the government. He had an immense amount of people working for him. Herod was both brilliant in that he was building Jerusalem up to be a technical masterpiece, but he was also breaking the backs of the Jewish people. And most people were starving. Everyone was dirt poor. So there lacked peace.

And in Jerusalem at the time, there were different groups of people, with different relationships with the local government. During the time of Alexander the Great's ruling of the Near East, there was a split over how to interact with the ideals of Greece, or Hellenistic thinking. Some decided to adapt to Greek ways, and others buckled down and were much more vigilant in observing Jewish tradition.

This gave rise to the following sects:

The Pharisees were an ultra orthodox group of Jewish people obsessed with being separate from the heathen societies around them, especially the influences of the Greek people. They started as the group of people who fought against the Hellenizers, and their name of Pharisee meant "separatist". The goal and mission of the Pharisee people was to turn all the hearts of

Israel back to God so that he would come and rescue them, allowing them to have their own nation again and be in right relationship with God. The Pharisees would control the synagogue, and teach the people to join in their ways.

The Sadducees were the holders of wealth and power at the time. They held the priestly positions, had major control of the temple, and largely had strayed away from tradition. They did not believe in a resurrection or in spirits and angels. And they embraced Hellenism, or Greek ideals.

Then there were the Essenes. And these were a next level Pharisee. They lived away from society largely and lived celibate lives. Living in caves, they believed they were completely separate from the societies around themselves. They gave themselves to prayer, fasting, studying scripture and ceremonial cleanses. These people were next level. And they believed that they were the true Israel, the people who would receive the coming Messiah.

You also had the scribes, who wrote down the scriptures, and because they knew the scriptures so well, they did a lot of the teaching. They were closely associated with the Pharisees.

The Herodians were a group of people who believed the best interest for the Jewish people was to remain under the power of Herod and the Roman Empire. (Pfeiffer)

And then we have everyone else in society, many of them poor, and not knowing where to go. Largely lost.

And look at who God sends the Angel to? It was not the Pharisees, who had worked so hard to gain the approval of God, to get every little detail right.

It was not the Essenes, who left society to make sure that they got nothing wrong and believe that they were the ones who would receive the new Messiah.

And it was not the Sadducees, who had all of the wealth and the power.

But instead it was the Shepherds.

And the Shepherds of this time are outcasts. They live on the outsides of the city, they are seen as unclean, and because they are unclean they cannot keep up with religious practices and rituals, and so they are further outcasted. They are peasants, so poor because of the outrageous taxation, and lonely from being on the outside. And these are the people who God decides to announce the birth of Jesus, the prince of peace.

And this is so ironic. The Pharisees and Essenes believe that they are in right relationship with God, and we would think God would come to them. The Sadducees believe they are creating peace by mixing with the cultures around them, by working alongside their Greek neighbors.

And the Herodians believe they already have peace, as Rome has brought about a peace that had not really been known before. In fact, Caesar Augustus', the ruler of the Roman Empire, had a name referring to Octavian, which meant "the divine Savior, the Lord, the one through whom peace comes to the world."

This Angelic announcement tells us that the peace of God is coming and has come to people we would not think of, and his peace is so much greater than the best of what the world can offer. Even as all the enemies of an empire are conquered, nothing can compare to the peace that this little baby will bring, and this peace will rest upon those who God favours.

We see as Jesus goes about his ministry, that he brings about different kinds of peace. We see that he brings tangible peace by feeding the hungry and healing the sick. He also brings peace by reaching across the gaps to different people groups, the Roman soldier, the Samaritan woman, the tax collector.

But this morning, I want to focus in on three ways that Jesus brings us peace, and why it is such a gift for us this Christmas season.

The first kind of peace that we can receive this Christmas is peace with God, that he extended to us when he gave his son up to die, and he rose again. Romans 5:8-10 says this:

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

It says we were enemies of God, which means things were not peaceful! And if you think about it, and who is really powerful, and who is really able to impact your life, it should be God that we are concerned about having peace with, right? The God who started all of this, who placed every star in its place, who has every temperature set exactly as such, who gives our planet the perfect amount of moisture, who has set every little detail.

In Micah chapter 2, God lays out his heart for the wicked, and it does not sound peaceful!

"Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance. Therefore, the Lord says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity."
Micah 2:1-3

And he also says

"Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. You drive the women of my people from their pleasant homes. You take away my blessing from their children forever. Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond all remedy."

Micah 2:8-10 NIV

As sinful people, we have separated ourselves from God, and we have created unrest. We did not have that deep peace we once had with God, instead it was God calling out to us in the wilderness, coming back to him and then leaving again.

But God sent his son, and that son, Jesus, gives himself up for us. He walks willingly like a sheep to the slaughterhouse, so that we might have peace with God. And it is right here for us, we can accept this peace with God. And it is the best gift. Last week Pastor Dan mentioned that our whole purpose in life is to enjoy God and glorify him forever. And part of that is enjoying our peaceful relationship with God.

The moments that I am at most peace, is when I am in the presence of God, and this wave of God's peace is over me. There may be unrest and violent words all around me, but I am at peace because God is at peace with me.

And he gives me the Holy Spirit. This is an always present presence of peace. It is something that the world would sit in mile long line ups for if they only knew. But instead for so many, they believe that buying gifts for their families on Black Friday will give them peace.

And so we have a completeness, we are in right relationship with God if we accept his gift and follow him with abandon. But we have a further completeness, a greater wholeness that is coming when we will see Jesus face to face when he returns.

And when we have peace with God, he also gives us another peace when we call upon his name, and that is inner peace. Peace within our being.

And this goes along with having the Holy Spirit in us. Peace is one of the many fruits of the Holy Spirit, and it sets us apart as different from people who do not have the Holy Spirit.

This gift of inner peace is so highly sought after. People spend thousands of dollars on vacations so they can escape their normal lives in pursuit of peace. I have done this. People spend money on yoga sessions, meditations, essential oils, people go out to cabins in the summer, in fact it is very trendy right now to spend lots of time out in the wilderness away from cell phone reception, looking for inner peace.

We also know that there is a great deal of people encountering anxiety, and inner battles. Over the past years I have talked with many students about depression and thoughts of suicide and visited several in the hospital. Last week on the last week of youth group, we talked about

peace, and I asked if they could use some of that in their lives right now. And every single hand went up.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can have life, and he gives us his spirit. And what does the Spirit bring? Peace.

And this is one of those present and still coming gifts. Christians will still struggle with anxiety. Inner battles will still happen, but Jesus is present, and we can always lean into him during these times.

1 Peter 5:7 says

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

1 Peter 5:6-7 NIV

And Colossians 3:15 says

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."

Colossians 3:15 NIV

Christ offers us peace within our souls, but we have to submit our worries and anxieties onto him. We may wonder why we are so stressed, and worried, and afraid, but how much time did we spend that day in his presence, with nothing else around? Did we have enough time for that?

This gift of peace is available to us. And it is attractive to the world.

Who do you like being around at work? The one who is worried, pessimistic, stressed? Or the one who seems to be relaxed, poised, and focused?

We are called to share this peace with the world, as God gave it to us.

And the last kind of peace we will explore this morning is peace with one another. And this is one that I think most people like the idea of, but the cost of peace is rather uncomfortable. But as Christians, we must look to Jesus as our example. This gift of peace that Jesus gives us, comes with a cost, but we are called to give it away to others who may not have it.

"Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Hebrews 12:14 NIV

And

1 Peter 3:9-11 says

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it."

And finally 1 Thessalonians 5:15 says

"Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else."

As believers we are called to take the peace that God has given us with Himself, and the peace he has given us within, and give that to those around us. But there is always someone who pays for peace. Someone receives the pain of conflict in creating peace.

But we see Jesus who was pained by our rejection of him, pained by the way we treat each other, pained by the way we treat ourselves, his creation. He takes that pain on the cross and pays the ultimate sacrifice. Allowing us to have peace with him.

And so we are to do likewise with those around us.

We can only do this because we have peace with God and peace within. This comes with the Holy Spirit. And as we go out into the world, looking like our Father, pursuing peace, being peace-makers, we may be some of the only peace that our neighbors will encounter. We may be the only ones who are different in the way we speak and act in the office.

And while the world is out buying Christmas gifts for family members they may even avoid at all costs except for Christmas because the tradition is to be together for Christmas, which then creates some of the least peaceful times, I am sure that the recipient would rather have peace.

The kids of the world may want a new Xbox, but really they want and need peace between their parents. Your brother or sister, mom or dad may appreciate the gift you are giving them, but peace within the family is likely something that tugs at their heart for much longer through the year.

And it might be painful, and hard to pursue. This gift of peace does come with a cost, but it also came at a cost when Jesus gave it to us. And his gift of peace allows us to turn to our neighbor, our friends, our family and to extend it to them. Even though they might not actually deserve it.

And for me, I sometimes like holding on to conflict. If I remain bitter with some one, or if I continue to react to the pain they inflict on me, I keep control of the situation. It feels like I have power, and I can inflict pain on them as they inflict pain on me.

But Jesus shows up to Shepherds, who are sinful, unclean, they are not zealous and passionate about living godly like the Pharisees were, and I am sure that God was deeply grieved by their sin, but the Angel appears to them and declares God's gift of peace to them.

Jesus is calling this Christmas, that we would receive his peace, give up our control, and instead pursue peace. It is what we all deep down are looking for, and it is the gift that lasts so much longer than any other gift we can give this Christmas.