

## Moderator's Christmas Message – Christmas, 2016

*(Luke 1:76-79) And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

*(John 14:27) 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.*

I feel faintly ridiculous this Christmas, lighting candles of hope, of peace. I feel faintly ridiculous lighting a candle of hope after having read the paper, of peace after having listened to the news, candles of hope and peace after taking any kind of realistic look around this troubled old world we call home. A media filled with images of violence on every hand; an insoluble morass of hatred and heartless terror in the same Middle East which gives birth to the Christmas story; refugee families by the million, fleeing persecution and destruction often at the hands of their own government; seemingly daily stories of bombings, of shootings, of senseless killing, and we light some candles, we sing some songs. A candle of hope. A song of peace. Doesn't it seem to you, somehow, ridiculous?

I wonder if Jesus felt ridiculous promising hope. Preaching peace. He didn't light a candle, but, his face lit by the hot Mediterranean sun, he said these words (Matthew 12:21 NIV): *"In (my) name the nations will put their hope."* He didn't sing a song, but, in an upper room, his face luminous in the glow of an oil lamp, hands breaking bread, a cup filled with wine, a last supper with friends, he said (John 14:27 NRSV): *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."*

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."* These words, he says, when he knows what's coming. These words, he says, when an hour later he's in a place called Gethsemane, on his hands and knees sweating drops of blood, praying that God would bail him out, come up with a different plan, find another way. *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."* These words, he says, when an hour after that he's betrayed by a friend, grabbed by the guards, dragged off to a kangaroo court, and we know what happens next. I wonder if Jesus felt ridiculous promising hope, promising peace, on the eve of the twenty-four darkest hours in the history of all the world. But he looked around the room, he looked into their eyes, and said the words nonetheless. *"In (my) name the nations will put their hope... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

Such a promise. Such a gift. And yet for those who heard it first-hand, from Jesus himself, it must, for them, mere hours later, have seemed the most empty promise ever made, the most empty gift ever given.

The thing is, Jesus didn't even start this promise. He was just making the same promise God had made so long ago. He's just carrying on in the tradition of old Isaiah, who sang God's song of hope, of peace, of joy, eight centuries before. Listen:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9)*

That's quite a promise. When you think that thirty years or so after Isaiah comes out with this, the boots of the tramping warriors of Assyria are rolling the garments of the people of Israel in blood, when not long after that the Babylonians finish the job and lay the Temple flat, when the throne of David is toppled for good, when Israel becomes, for the next twenty-eight hundred years, all the way from Isaiah till now, a place where hope, where peace, where joy is measured by the minute, because if you try to measure by the hour, you never get past "one." "*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" That's quite a promise. That's quite a song. I wonder if Isaiah felt ridiculous, too.

Jesus' uncle Zechariah has the courage to sing Isaiah's song too, eight centuries after the fact. Old Zechariah sings the song because when he and his wife had given up hope of ever having a child, an angel shows up, scaring the wits right out of the old man. And the angel says in the kind of voice only angels have, the kind of voice with the clarity of crystal and the blast like a trumpet and the whisper like you only hear with your heart:

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:13-17)*

And Zechariah says "You must be joking," and the angel's eyes flash in the way that only angel's eyes can, and next thing you know Zechariah can't speak, struck mute, stumbles out of the Temple, waving his arms, making not a sound, and not a sound he makes until, nine months and eight days later, he calls his baby "John," and sings this Christmas promise, sings this Christmas song:

*“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

And maybe he felt as ridiculous as he looked, an old man with a baby boy in his arms, singing songs of hope, of peace, of forgiveness. But you get the feeling he didn't much care how he looked, how he felt; all his care was wrapped up in the baby in his arms, the forerunner to the hope and peace to come, *“to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

What do we do with these prayers? What do we do with these songs? What do we do with a faith that promises hope and peace and joy and love when despair, chaos, misery and hatred surround us on all sides? *“In (my) name the nations will put their hope... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

Where? Where? I don't see much hope. I look to our world, and I see fanatics spreading terror in the name of God, blowing up the innocent in insanely misguided acts of devotion and praise to a bloodthirsty deity of their own warped devising. I turn on the television, and I see an entertainment industry dedicated to sex and violence and constant chaotic clamour - anything but peace. I look even to our own congregation – maybe here I'll find hope, peace, joy – and I discover that we're not immune to heartbreak - I discover that suffering and sorrow and illness and death, broken hearts and broken homes and children who wonder what's coming next and a holiday season which means little more to many of us than unpayable bills and unquenchable stress - I discover that these things are a part of our reality too.

And so again I ask, in the face of all this darkness, how dare we light these candles? How dare we celebrate this story, how dare we sing this song, how dare we hang these banners? How can we call this a gift?

And yet. And yet, we light these candles; year after year we light these candles; and it is because of the darkness we light them. We celebrate this story, year after year, because of the state of our world. We sing this song, year after year, because of the clamour of hatred. We need these gifts of hope, of peace, of joy, of love, year after year, day after day, hour after hour, precisely because there is so little hope, so little peace, so little joy, so little love that our world can give.

You see, the gift Jesus gives, the hope, peace, joy and love Jesus promises, is a different hope, peace, joy and love. *“I do not give to you as the world gives,”* he says. The gift Jesus gives, is a hope, peace, joy and love deep inside. The hope the world gives, such as a security based on overwhelming military force, can vanish with the

blast of a terrorist's bomb. A peace based on financial well-being can evaporate with the crash of a telecom stock. A joy based upon good health can shatter with the sound of the doctor's voice telling us they'll have to run more tests to make sure, but he doesn't like what he sees. A love predicated upon what you can give and measured by what you can get is love as commodity, a love doomed to disappoint. The hope, peace, joy and love the world gives is a transient, fleeting thing, a counterfeit, an illusion, a mirage. But that given by God is eternal, forever, real. There is, in the midst of the darkness, only one true light; in the midst of our lives, but one true hope, peace, joy and love: and that is the hope, the peace, the joy and the love of Christ.

This gift is no illusion; it is real, for I have seen the power of this gift in action. I have seen this gift save and transform. I have seen this gift work miracles in the lives of people like you, for it is in your lives that I have seen this hope, peace, joy and love made real. When I ask myself, "How can someone carry on the face of such worry, such heartbreak, such illness, such tragedy," it is in your lives I have seen the answer. It is you who, managing day to day in impossible situations, who, laying in the hospital bed, who, standing by the grave of a loved one lost, have turned to me and said, "I do not know where I would be without God. I do not know what I would do without the love of those around me. I do not know how I could cope without my faith." It is you, who in your darkest moments, have found, often to your own deep surprise, that light which the darkness cannot overcome; that gift which Jesus has given:

*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.*

Jesus gives his gift, makes his promise, because of our fearful, anxious, fragile, broken hearts. "I am with you always," says the promise; "the light is shining in your hearts; I am with you always; the hope, the peace, the joy, the love will never die." We light the candles because, as John told us in his Christmas story (John 1:4-5), "in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The darkness did not – cannot – will not – overcome it.

In the time of your battle, your struggle, your heartbreak; in the midst of your darkness; when you're not sure which way to turn: turn your mind to these words, open your heart and your hands to this gift, this promise, this candle in the dark:

*"In (my) name the nations will put their hope... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13 NRSV); Amen.*