

## *The Peace of the Rebel, Jesus*

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**Ancient Witness:** Luke 2:8-14

Today we are going to focus on the Advent theme of “peace.” Jesus was often referred to as the Prince of Peace. Our selection from the gospel of Luke reads:

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will among all.”*

Jesus was born as a bringer of peace, but it is not a kind of peace that ordinarily comes to mind. Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest and antiwar activist who died a few years ago, and he wrote:

*We have assumed the name of peacemakers, but we have been, by and large, unwilling to pay any significant price...*

*“Of course, let us have peace,” we cry, “but let us have normalcy, let us lose nothing, let our lives stand intact...”*

*There is no peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war, at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace, prison and death in its wake.*

And this morning I’d like to remember that Jesus was a rebel, someone who wasn’t afraid to confront the powers of the establishment, someone who wasn’t afraid to raise some dust and “disturb the peace” among those who were too complacent and comfortable.

I had said before that this makes sense, since Jesus was the son of a social activist, Mary, who I like to think of as the Joan Baez of her time. His mother sang protest songs, such as the one we call “The Magnificat”:

*God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
God has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted those of low degree;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
And the rich God has sent empty away.*

All his life, Jesus was a tireless advocate for the “least of those” in society. He was on the side of the poor, the hungry and those of low degree. He was on the side of the outcast, the rejected and the oppressed. He opposed the system that dominated and exploited so many and that lined the pockets of the elite few. Justice and fairness were essential to Jesus’ understanding of peace.

For years, one of my favorite Christmas songs that I listen to was written and sung by Jackson Browne. And you’ll hear it later in this service. I’ll share some of the lyrics with you this morning (“The Rebel Jesus,” Jackson Browne):

*We guard our world with locks and guns  
 And we guard our fine possessions  
 Once a year when Christmas comes  
 We give to our relations  
 And perhaps we give a little to the poor  
 If the generosity should seize us  
 But if anyone of us should interfere  
 In the business of why they are poor  
 They'll get the same as the rebel Jesus*

*But please forgive me if I seem  
 To take the tone of judgment  
 For I've no wish to come between  
 This day and your enjoyment  
 In this life of hardship and of earthly toil  
 We have need of anything that frees us  
 So I bid you pleasure and I bid you cheer  
 From a heathen and a pagan  
 On the side of the rebel Jesus.*

Now, I often feel more in common with heathens and pagans or atheists and agnostics who are on the side of the rebel, Jesus, than with fellow Christians who ignore the rebellious nature of Jesus. I like this song because it captures this aspect that is usually ignored. When we celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmastime, often it is buried beneath piles of sentimentality. And we forget that we are celebrating the birth of a rebel, a nonviolent revolutionary. This was someone who was killed because he was too dangerous, a threat to those in power. As that New Testament scholar, Dominic Crossan, said,

*Those who live by compassion are often canonized;  
 Those who live by justice are often crucified.*

This is the same old story that is told in every generation. Brazilian Archbishop, Dom Helder Camara, once said,

*When I fed the poor, they called me a saint.  
 When I asked why they are poor, they called me a communist.*

I think it is important at this time of year that somebody reminds us of this aspect of Jesus, whose birth we are celebrating. There are many aspects to Jesus: the teacher, the mystic, the healer. But one of the aspects that is the first to be forgotten is Jesus, the social prophet. Listen to some more of Camara's words:

*My personal vocation is to be a pilgrim of peace . . . We, as Christians, are on the side of nonviolence and this is in no way an option for weakness and passivity. Opting for nonviolence means to believe more strongly in the power of truth, justice, and love than in the power of wars, weapons, and hatred.*

Jesus located himself in the great tradition of the prophets. He advocated a kind of peace that went beyond the personal peace of our hearts, to a kind of peace that established an entirely new

order on earth. Jesus called for disarmament of the most radical kind. In the words of the prophet:

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4/Micah 4:3)*

Many people do not realize that the first several generations of Christians were pacifists; they would not enlist in the army.

Bishop Camara wrote about three levels of societal violence:

Level One is violence of oppression and injustice. This is the violence that people experience when they live in poverty, hunger and deprivation. One could call this “systemic violence.” Level Two is the violence that emerges from this despair—rebellion and revolt. I would also include random, senseless violence and crime that comes out of empty lives. Level Three violence is the response to level two violence: repression and imprisonment.

Now, even if we were able to somehow end the violence of levels two and three, there is still the violence of level one with which we must contend if we are to have true peace. We still have the violence of poverty and inequality. The prophet, Jeremiah, talked about this kind of false peace when he said,

*Prophets and priests are frauds, every one of them! They bind my people’s wounds, but only skin deep, when they say, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.*

And Jesus challenged this superficial peace of Rome, the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the mere absence of war, and he was violently executed for sedition as a political threat of the empire.

This is an aspect of Jesus that is probably the most difficult to hear, and so this is why it is probably absent. Yes, Jesus leads us to a peace within our hearts that is unshakable and personal. But he also led us to a peace that is external and in direct conflict with the world. Jesus called attention to the kingdom of heaven, which is internal. “It is within you,” he said. But he also called for this kingdom to be established “on earth, as it is in heaven.” In other words, he called for a new order, a transformation of society. He expected his followers to work to establish this new reign of peace. As some have pointed out, anyone can love peace, but Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the peace-lovers." He says “peace *makers*.” He is referring to a life vocation, not a hobby on the sidelines of life.

And so at the celebration of the birth of Jesus, it is appropriate to ask ourselves what it means to take on being peacemakers as part of our life vocation. For people in other generations it meant different things. Henry David Thoreau wrote in 1848,

*How does it become a man to behave towards this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.*

Thoreau addressed the issues of the United States waging war with Mexico and slavery. Today, we can focus upon a system of trade that exploits the labor of millions in third world countries without the protections that would enable these workers to increase their wages or improve their conditions, keeping them perpetually in poverty. We might also address how billions of dollars are being spent on the military-industrial-congressional-complex, while we face cuts in social spending for food stamps, education and healthcare.

There are wars raging right now—

- Israel has bombed Gaza for over a year with the military and financial support of the U.S.
- There's a war against the poor and working class as money is funneled toward the super wealthy and corporations, as social security funds are plundered, as funds for public education are threatened.
- There's a war against immigrants and those who are labeled "other."
- There's a war against our planet's atmosphere, and as we pump out greenhouse gases, scientists, indigenous people and concerned citizens are demanding that we stop building pipelines and begin the transfer to renewable energy.

Helen Keller once criticized the kind of internal peace that was just personal and private, saying,

*I do not ask for the peace that passeth understanding. I ask for the understanding that bringeth peace.*

I see it a little differently: We need both. The two are connected. In the life of Jesus we can see that each one leads to the other. The deep, mystical peace that "passes understanding" leads to a courageous working for peace on earth. As we struggle for peace with justice we need to be spiritually grounded, it seems to me.

We see this connection between the internal and external peace in prophets such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who, challenged economic injustice, racism and war, said that peace is not just a goal, but a means by which we arrive at that goal, and that the means and the ends must cohere.

If we are truly working for peace, there are certain things in our social system to which we ought to be maladjusted, said King. Certain circumstances in our world should disturb our peace. The church should not be just a sanctuary, a quiet refuge for personal peace, but a community in which we are challenged, riled up and where we cultivate our courage and commitment to follow the peace of the rebel, Jesus.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Benediction:** (written by Clinton Marsh, peace activist in the Presbyterian Church)

*And now, I am supposed to say to you, "Go in peace." But how can I say, "Go in peace," when you are going out into a world where you are insecure, whether at home or on your neighborhood street? Out into a world where race is set against race and ethnic cleansing is a name for genocide? Out into a world where people are hungry and homeless, while their governments squander billions of dollars on instruments of destruction that they dare not use? Out into a world where every night millions of mothers watch their children sink into a hungry slumber, only to awaken (if they awaken) to another hungry tomorrow? With a world like that out there, how can I say to you, "Go in peace?" But I dare say, "Go in peace," because Jesus says "I give you my peace." But—remember—he who says, "I give you my peace" also says, "If you would be my disciple and have my peace, take up your cross and follow me!"*

*So I say to you, "Go in peace!"—If you dare!*