

December 12, 2004

"The Message of the Candles"

Isaiah 40:1-5, 11; Matthew 5:1-11

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## INTRODUCTION

Three candles now flicker on the Advent wreath. Two weeks ago the candle of hope began our journey toward the celebration of Christmas. We heard the Apostle, Paul speak to us from his letter to the Romans: "...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (5: 2b-5)

Last Sunday the candle of love illuminated our Advent journey. We heard from the Gospel of John, "...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." Gary spoke so helpfully about the experience and commitment of love. I found myself remembering an old story about an elderly couple, married for more than fifty years. One night they were lying in bed and the wife said, "dear, do you remember when we were younger, how we would lie close together?" The husband with arthritic effort scooted over next to his wife. Then, she said, "dear, do you remember how we would hold hands before going to sleep?" The husband lovingly reached over and took his wife's hand. Then, she said, "dear, do you remember how you would nibble on my ear?" At that point the husband threw back the covers and lurched out of bed. The wife, dismayed and with hurt in her voice asked, "dear, where are you going?" And he replied, "to get my teeth."

This morning we are led by the candle of peace. Would it be fair for me to suggest that the word, "peace," is used almost mindlessly. Each Sunday in our worship we take moments to greet one another with various uses of the word. "Peace be with you...the peace of the Lord be with you...the peace of Christ be with you..." It is for us a genial way of reaching out, making connection with one another. Perhaps you like I have little more than friendly good will in mind as we greet.

In other contexts the word is used to describe something that is desired but missing – between nations, between persons, and between those competing internal selves that clamor for attention.

Secondly, would it be helpful for me to suggest that the meaning which the flickering candle of peace would help us find is different from the meanings which our culture might suggest by its use of this fragile, little word. Some of you are old enough to remember the old peacenik days when we heard, "peace and love, baby." To be sure there were several interpretations of that expression. But, for some it suggested an absence of conflict and a certain measure of passivity – kick-back and tune-out, some of the flower child generation proclaimed.

Do I sense correctly that our world would describe peace as the absence of conflict? Therefore, a peaceful person is untroubled, well behaved and passive. Think how we use the word, peace: "...To hold one's peace means to be quiet, to keep the peace means to obey, to make peace means to surrender, and to rest in peace means, after all, to die. Given these choices, is it any wonder that we feel some ambivalence about whether we want this kind of peace in our lives?" (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Weavings")

## JESUS AND PEACE

Look with me at the ways in which Jesus used the word, peace. In Luke chapter, 7, Jesus says to the woman who has anointed his feet, "your faith has saved you; go in peace." In chapter 8 he says to the woman who has been healed by touching his tunic, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." As Jesus was saying farewell to his disciples at the Last Supper, he said,

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives..." (John 14: 27) His last words to them in that long final discourse (John 16) "...I have said this to you, so that you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" And his first words to them after the resurrection, repeated over and over again, were, "Peace be with you." (John 20: 19-26)

There is a strength and a gentleness, a tenderness and a toughness about the word peace, when spoken by Jesus in our Gospels. There is a natural tendency for us to make Jesus comfortable and compatible. A colleague of mine once preached a sermon in which she suggested that we make Jesus our tranquilizer of choice. It was an encouraging message for many in the congregation that day, I am sure. And I will in a moment suggest that a relationship with the Christ of God enables us to deal with the stresses and strains, the emotional aches and pains of our human experience. But does a relationship with Jesus desensitize us into blissful tranquility?

This morning's reading from Isaiah (chapter 40 elicits grateful emotion for many of us. "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people..." I hear the tenor from Handel's, "Messiah" calling to our spirits: "Comfort ye..." But is interesting to think about that word, "comfort." In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the word had a different connotation. It was understood to be a derivative of two Latin words, con=with, and fortis=strength. Today that word suggests a cushy recliner, a calm repose, an absence of any untoward emotion. Here is a study in how language changes. For the King James translator of this ancient passage understood that Isaiah was calling people to a new and renewing vision of what God would do in and through God's people. It was a vision which demanded a thoughtful response.

Earlier in Isaiah this ancient prophet of God's truth promised an earthly expression of God who would come as a child, who would lead with authority and he will be named, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...and there shall be endless peace..." (Isaiah 9)

#### SHALOM

The word that Jesus would have heard in his home and in the synagogue would have been, "shalom." It meant strength, wholeness, well-being. It was richness, plenty and joy. It was a vision of God's intentions for human life. It was a vision that has and does sustain us in the imperfect, unfinished experience of life in this world. The Gospel writers and the early church were quick to recognize a connection between the coming of Jesus and the ancient promises to Israel. You remember when Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was filled with the Holy Spirit...he predicted that the child to be born to Mary would "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the way of death" and guide their feet "into the way of shalom" (Luke 1: 79). And the angels who appeared to the shepherds announced, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace (shalom) among those whom he favors." (Luke 2: 14)

#### JESUS IS OUR PEACE

Peace like hope and love are not only great themes which give guiding focus for our living, but even more they are experiences which come wrapped in a personal relationship. This week it happened again, as it has been happening with increasing frequency in recent years. I met a new friend who told me his story of inviting Christ into his life. An ex marine who had made almost every kind of mistake one could make. He said he lived fast and worked hard not to think too deeply about anything. When he did find himself thinking about this God stuff he simply shrugged, acknowledged that his future in that department held little hope. He was convinced that ultimately he would burn in hell. Then, one day eighteen years ago now, when he was forty one, someone shared with him news that was too good to be true. He invited Christ into his life and things have never been the same. He felt a peace that the world could neither give nor take away; he began to live with hope for a future with adventure and purpose; he discovered a

capacity to love that renewed broken relationships that littered his life. And though we have yet to light the candle, he new a joy that filled his days with gladness.

My friend, this one whose birth we prepare to celebrate did not just come teaching peace, preaching peace, talking peace – he was and is God’s personal expression who seeks residence in my heart and your heart. Have you invited Christ into your heart? Oh, perhaps, you have done so in some quiet moment of memory. But, what about recently? He is our hope, our peace, the very source of love which saves and heals.

#### OUR TITHES AND OFFERINGS

This morning we bring our faith promises and pledges, our Christmas offerings and our gifts to the old wooden box. Let it be an act of love and gratefulness for what Jesus has brought to the world and to our lives. This is not an angry God, not a judging deity, but the God of creation who loves all people and seeks to lead us in the ways of shalom.

I think of Roberta Bondi, here for the Guelich lectures, pushing the borders of our understanding about God suggesting that his love is more lavish, excessive than anything we could imagine. She said, “God loves us not inspite of who we are but because of who we are...” That statement challenged me and has continued to nurture my own understanding and prayerfulness.

So, dear family of God, I invite us to bring our gifts not in order that God might love us for our generosity but because God has loved us and our giving is a way of expressing our gratefulness. Grateful for the peace which passes all understanding; a peace which gives comfort/strength for the challenges of our days; a peace that calms and renews us for the work of peacemaking...

#### PEACEMAKERS

I cannot leave us without pressing our attention to Matthew chapter five, particularly verse, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

You know, Jesus never said, blessed are you when you try to make people think as you think, or believe as you believe. He simply does in our lives what he would have us give to the life of those around us and to our world of such great need.

Blessed are you who see and hear God’s call to you to give yourself to God’s work in and through this beloved family of faith. There is a little story that goes like this. A man is rescued from a desert island where he survived alone for fifteen years. Before leaving, he gave his rescuers a little tour of the buildings he had constructed as a sort of one-man town over the years: “That was my house, that was my store, this building was a kind of cabana, and over here is where I go to church.”

“What’s the building next to it?” asked one of the rescuers?

“Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.”

#### CONCLUSION

Let’s simply invite Christ into our hearts and then offer ourselves to work in and through this challenging and amazing place for a future hinted at by the “shalom” which Christ embodied and proclaimed. Amen