

SUNDAY
DECEMBER 3
9AM | 11AM

Peace
on
Earth?



Sunday, December 3, 2023
“Peace on Earth?”
Charlie Berthoud | Mark 13:24-37

It might look and feel and sound like Christmas, but it’s not Christmas yet.

Yes, the radio is filled with festive seasonal music. Yes, the “holiday shopping season” is in high gear. Yes, lights are shining around the neighborhood. And the Christmas tree is up here in the sanctuary.

But Christmas is three weeks from tomorrow. Before we get to the manger and the angels and the shepherds, we Christians go through the season of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas. This year, the fourth Sunday of Advent is Christmas Eve. Advent means “coming” and this season is a time to remember the coming of Jesus—the presence of God in the flesh— two thousand years ago, **AND** to remember the scriptural promise that Jesus will come again.

God has come to be with us, and God will come again.

So, we are in the “in between time.”

We are in between the time when Jesus was born with the angels singing about peace on earth and when Jesus proclaimed that God’s kingdom had come, and the time in the future when there will be no more tears, no more death, no more despair, when God’s kingdom will come in its fullness.

December is perhaps the most nostalgic month of the year, when we look back to remember not only the birth of Jesus but also holiday traditions and family gatherings, thinking about Christmas celebrations of the past. Remembering those treasured moments is a beautiful thing.

But as Christians in the season of Advent, we need to look back **and** look to the future, and thus become more awake and alert in the present.

Our scripture reading for today is the assigned lectionary reading for the first Sunday of Advent. It comes from the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel, which is the one chapter in Mark with apocalyptic themes. Written near the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the text is understandably disturbing, with a sense of the imminent end of things.

But the world continued and "the time" of God's coming again hasn't happened yet.

Over the years, many people have predicted when this future time would be, but the scripture is pretty clear that no human knows when that will be. Instead, three times in the reading we hear the admonition to watch and keep awake.

Listen for God's word...

'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and
glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and
puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these
things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you,
this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken
place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the
Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the
time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and
puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to
be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master
of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at

dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

After the horrors of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, there was a surge in apocalyptic thinking. Readings like the one we just heard became very popular. Many American Christians believed the falling of the twin towers was a sign of "the end of the world."

In that context, I remember one thoughtful commenter noting that terrorism was a reality for much of the world for a long time, but suddenly when it strikes American soil, Americans think it's now the end of the world. How arrogant, noted the commentator.

The sad reality is that our world and history are full of violence and despair. These disturbing images and challenging words from Mark 13 are a helpful balance for us when we are tempted to ignore the reality of human suffering or to sleep-walk through life.

Advent is time for us to wake up to the reality of life around us and to open our eyes for God who has come to be with us in the person of Jesus to lead us into a new future.

As we faithfully journey through Advent, pondering the Advent songs and scriptures and themes, we can be renewed in the promise of God's kingdom, God's realm, God's new reality.

We pray every time we gather: Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom has begun, but it's not here in its fullness. We are in the in between time.

A big part of that kingdom and of the teaching of Jesus is about PEACE so in this season of Advent, our focus is on **peace**. The Bible is full of teachings on peace.

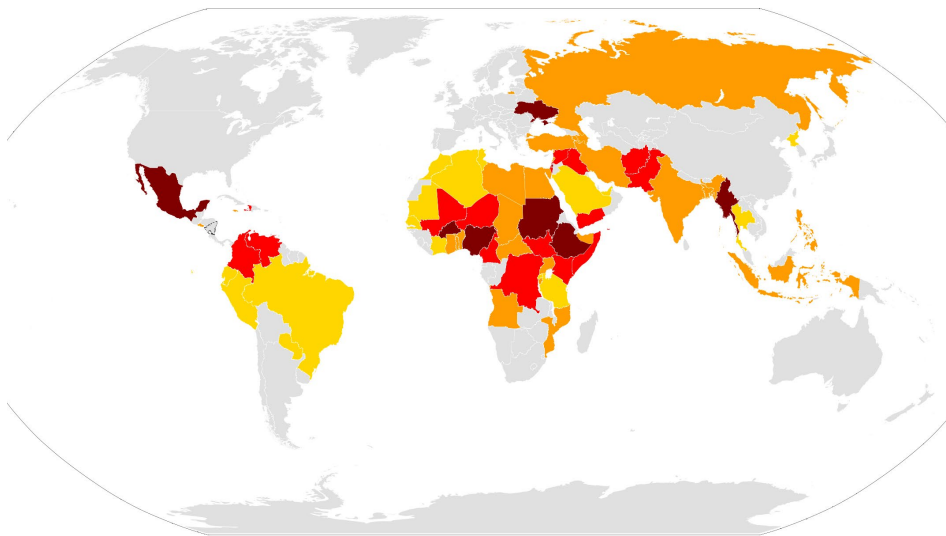
- The prophet Isaiah tells us that the savior will be the prince of peace
- Jesus told his followers "my peace I give to you..."

- The psalmist challenges us “seek peace and pursue it.”
- Jesus commends the work of peace saying “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.”

Today we reflect on peace in the world. In coming weeks, we’ll ponder peace in our nation and community, peace among our family and friends, and peace in ourselves.

Peace on earth is as elusive as ever. We’re well aware of the tragic violence in Israel and Gaza, but this is far from the only conflict in the world right now.

Wikipedia has a page dedicated to ongoing conflicts in the world, with the darker the color representing the more serious the conflict.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/Ongoing_conflicts_around_the_world.svg

Given the pervasive and persistent reality of war and conflict, it might be tempting to give up on peacemaking and think “what’s the point?”

I’ve certainly felt that way about the Middle East.

But when I think big picture, I am absolutely convinced that because of the perseverance, courage, prayerfulness, generosity, and hopefulness of peacemakers that these conflicts are not as bad as they could be.

So, we keep working for peace.

We keep writing our elected officials and going to protests, we keep learning about the world and studying other cultures, we keep praying for peace and support those on the frontline of peacemaking.

Here at Covenant, we have a long relationship with Guatemala. While Guatemala is not currently any color on that world conflict map, it's in real danger right now, with the newly elected president at risk of being deposed before he is inaugurated on January 14. Many of us have written letters to US elected officials, urging them to support a peaceful transfer of power.



Mission co-worker Rev. Betsey Moe, who preached here a few months ago, is asking us to pray for Guatemala. I posted her most recent newsletter on our Facebook page yesterday, and we'll include it in the weekly email next week.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/letter/showing-up/>

Guatemala is also at risk of falling deeper into poverty and despair, so I'm glad we continue our support of Presbyterian churches in Santo Domingo and Coyolate, and our support of student scholarships.

Praying and supporting and connecting with Guatemala are the sort of things we do as Christians who are called to be peacemakers and to stay awake and alert in these in between times.

As our church works for peace in the world, I invite you—over these days of Advent—to ponder the gift and calling of peace. Jesus comes as the prince of peace, with the

gift of peace. We “pass the peace” every Sunday here in church. I hope we can find ways to pass the peace beyond these four walls.

[You might have noticed during our passing of the peace that we have a sign that says “Peace” for the sake of the people who are worshipping with us online.]

How can you reach out and make God’s peace more of a reality?

To help us more deeply welcome the gift of peace and share it, I invite you to take time every day in Advent to **pray for peace**. Maybe just find a short phrase and spend a minute or two repeating it, slowly.

You could use one of these, or your own:

- Fill me with your peace, Lord
- Make me an instrument of your peace
- Jesus you are the prince of peace
- May peace prevail in Guatemala [or wherever]
- Peace

I encourage you to write down a prayer like this or maybe just the word PEACE and put it in a convenient place: your kitchen table, your bathroom mirror, your car, your schoolbooks.

Then take time every day to pray for peace.

Making time and space to pray for peace will make us and our world more peaceful.

I’d like to close by prayerfully singing one verse from of my favorite Advent songs. Earlier in the service we sang one verse of “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”. Perhaps you’ve noticed that the “it” in question is the song of peace sung by the angels.

The song of peace remains a focus throughout the five verses. On this Sunday when we’re focused on peace around the world, the third verse is a good prayer for us, recognizing the reality of sin and strife, but also affirming hope in God’s peace.

Let us sing together:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
and we at war on earth hear not the tidings that they bring;
O, hush the noise and cease the strife to hear the angels sing!*

Amen.