

MATTHEW 3:1-6 & ISAIAH 11:1-11

OUR PERSPECTIVE IS OFTEN A KEY FACTOR IN HOW WE INTERPRET THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PEOPLE, EVENTS, AND JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE.

IN DICKEN'S "CHRISTMAS CAROL", EBENEZER SCROOGE BEGAN WITH ONE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS, WHICH WAS NEGATIVE.

BUT THE STORY ENDS WITH A SCROOGE SEEING CHRISTMAS DIFFERENTLY, PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF CHANGE OF HEART.

IN REAL LIFE, SOMETHING SIMILAR HAPPENED TO HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

HIS WIFE DIED IN 1861 AND THAT WAS FOLLOWED BY THE CIVIL WAR, IN WHICH THEIR SON WAS A SOLDIER. TWO YEARS LATER, CLOSE TO CHRISTMAS LONGFELLOW RECEIVED WORD HIS SON WAS SERIOUSLY WOUNDED.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY THAT YEAR, AS HE SAT AT HIS DESK, HE HEARD CHURCH BELLS RINGING IN CELEBRATION OF THE DAY.

IN RESPONSE HE WROTE HIS FAMOUS POEM THAT WAS LATER PUT TO MUSIC-"I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY".

IT SPEAKS ABOUT THE MESSAGE OF THE BELLS PROCLAIMING PEACE ON EARTH GOODWILL TO MEN AND WOMEN.

BUT LONGFELLOW REFLECTS ON THE SOUND OF CANNONS OF THE WAR AND HOW THERE IS NO PEACE, WRITING:

"AND IN DESPAIR I BOWED MY HEAD: THERE IS NO PEACE ON EARTH, I SAID: FOR HATE IS STRONG AND MOCKS THE SONG ON PEACE ON EARTH GOOD WILL TO (MEN) ALL.

BUT THIS IS FOLLOWED BY HIS EXPERIENCING OF GOD'S RESPONSE HIS DESPAIR.

THE FINAL VERSE IS A RECORD OF HIS REMEMBRANCE THAT GOD IS NOT YET FINISHED WITH THE WORLD.

"THEN PEALING THE BELLS MORE LOUD AND DEEP: GOD IS NOT DEAD NOR DOES HE SLEEP!

THE WRONG SHALL FAIL, THE RIGHT PREVAIL, WITH PEACE ON EARTH GOODWILL TO ALL".

TRULY IT MATTERS VERY LITTLE HOW MUCH WE LIKE THE HOLIDAY CALLED CHRISTMAS, OR NOT.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE MOVED BY GOD'S LOVE IN SENDING HIS SON INTO THE WORLD, SO THAT THE WORLD MIGHT BE SAVED THROUGH HIM.

IT IS HERE THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CALL TO REPENTANCE HAS A ROLE IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY.

JOHN PREPARES THE WAY FOR PEOPLE'S HEARTS TO RECEIVE CHRIST AND THE PEACE HE OFFERS.

FIRST AND FOREMOST IS OUR PEACE WITH GOD, WHICH IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH OUR REPENTANCE AND GOD'S FORGIVENESS BECAUSE OF JESUS.

HOWEVER TO SEE THAT PEACE, AS THE ONLY ONE JESUS OFFERS, IS TO EMBRACE A NARROW PERSPECTIVE OF GOD'S PLAN OF REDEMPTION.

THE PASSAGE WE HEARD FROM ISAIAH TODAY OFFERS A WIDER VIEW OF THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PEACE JESUS WILL BRING INTO THE WORLD, AFTER HIS RETURN TO EARTH.

ORIGINALLY THE VISION OFFERED HOPE TO GOD'S PEOPLE FOR DELIVERANCE FROM THE JUDGEMENT THEY WERE UNDER BECAUSE OF THEIR NATIONAL SIN.

GOD PROMISED, THROUGH THE PROPHET, THAT THEIR PRESENT CONDITIONS WERE NOT THE FINAL WORD.

THEY ARE TOLD THROUGH THE VISION - RECONCILIATION WITH GOD, AND EVENTUALLY WITH ALL OF CREATION, IS HOW THE STORY WILL END FOR THOSE WHO TRUST IN THE LORD.

FAR TOO OFTEN PEOPLE HAVE A LIMITED VIEW OF PEACE.  
BUT BIBLICAL PEACE ENCOMPASSES MUCH MORE THAN AN  
END OF HOSTILITY.

PEACE, FROM SCRIPTURE'S PERSPECTIVE INCLUDES:  
PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SPIRITUAL WELL  
BEING.

THIS INVOLVES NOT ONLY PERSONAL HEALTH, BUT HEALTHY  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE, FREED FROM  
HOSTILITY AND FEAR.

IT IS A PEACE THAT WILL REIGN WHEN JUSTICE AND  
RIGHTEOUSNESS PREVAIL ON EARTH.

AND AT THE HEART OF PEACE, IS OF COURSE OUR  
RECONCILIATION WITH GOD.

BUT AS VAST AS THIS UNDERSTANDING OF PEACE IS, IT IS  
STILL TOO NARROW, ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE.

THE IMAGE OF PEACE RECORDED IN ISAIAH 11 HAS BEEN  
CALLED: "THE MOST PICTURESQUE IN SCRIPTURE."

IT IS NAMED SO BECAUSE IT INCLUDES A STATE OF PEACE WE  
OFTEN FORGET ABOUT-HARMONY IN ALL OF CREATION.

THIS WAS THE KIND OF HARMONY THAT WAS FOUND IN THE  
GARDEN OF EDEN BEFORE SIN CAME INTO THE WORLD.

INDEED ANIMALS WILL NOT BE LEFT OUT OF GOD'S PEACE.  
THIS IS FAMILIAR TO MANY OF US.

THERE ARE WONDERFUL PICTURES, LIKE THE ONE I SHOWED  
THE CHILDREN, AND OTHER ARTISTIC RENDERINGS OF PEACE  
BETWEEN PREDATORS AND PREY.

THE VISION OF LIONS, LAMBS, WOLVES, BEARS, AND BABY  
GOATS WITH A CHILD IN THEIR MIDST HAS BEEN WELL  
RECORDED BY ARTISTS.

BUT AGAIN THERE IS OFTEN SOMETHING MISSING IN OUR  
VIEW OF THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM.

WHAT WE SO OFTEN IGNORE IS THE GREATEST HEALING OF A  
HOSTILE WITHIN NATURE.

I AM SPEAKING ABOUT RECONCILIATION OF THE FIRST BREAK  
IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND ANOTHER  
CREATURE MADE BY GOD--SNAKES.

REMEMBER GENESIS 3:14-15? IT IS THERE GOD DECLARES  
PUNISHMENT FOR THE SERPENT WHO TEMPTED EVE AND  
ADAM.

IT IS TOLD "BECAUSE YOU HAVE DONE THIS, CURSED ARE  
YOU AMONG ALL CREATURES; UPON YOUR BELLY YOU SHALL  
GO, AND DUST YOU SHALL EAT ALL THE DAYS OF YOUR LIFE.

I SHALL PUT ENMITY BETWEEN YOU AND THE WOMAN,  
BETWEEN YOUR OFFSPRING AND HERS...."

BUT IN ISAIAH 11 WE ARE TOLD GOD WILL MAKE PEACE FOR  
US EVEN WITH SNAKES.

THIS IS WHAT WILL BE WHEN SIN IS FINALLY GONE FROM THE  
WORLD, AND CREATION IS RESTORED TO THE GOODNESS GOD  
INTENDED.

YES, THE REIGN OF CHRIST AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN  
ON EARTH WILL BE ONE OF FULL, TRUE, AND LASTING PEACE.  
LISTEN AGAIN TO ISAIAH 11:8:

"THE NURSING CHILD WILL PLAY OVER THE HOLE OF THE ASP,  
AND THE WEANED CHILD WILL PUT ITS HAND OVER THE  
ADDER'S DEN.

THEY WILL NOT HURT OR DESTROY ON ALL MY HOLY  
MOUNTAIN, FOR THE EARTH WILL BE FILLED WITH THE  
KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD, AS THE WATERS COVER THE SEA."

THUS IS GIVEN THE PROMISE OF HOPE AND HEALING CHRIST'S  
INCARNATION, LIFE, DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND FUTURE  
RETURN PROVIDES- FOR ALL OF CREATION.

YES, THE SHOOT FROM JESSE'S STUMP SPRANG FORTH WHEN  
JESUS WAS BORN.

BUT THIS WAS ONLY THE FIRST STAGE IN THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE DESCRIBED BY ISAIAH.

JESUS IS INDEED THE KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS WHO SHALL RULE FOREVER IN A KINGDOM THAT KNOWS ONLY TRUE AND LASTING PEACE AND HARMONY.

HE SHALL RETURN ONE DAY TO BRING TO FULFILLMENT THE PEACE BETWEEN US AND GOD, AND US AND THE REST OF CREATION, HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION MAKES POSSIBLE.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH THE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SEASON? THE ANSWER IS EVERYTHING.

FIRST, EVEN AMONG THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW THE LORD, MANY SEEK TO LIVE OUT THE PROMISE OF PEACE GOD OFFERS, BY BEING A LITTLE KINDER OR MORE GENEROUS.

AND AMONG CHRISTIANS, THIS SEASON IS A REMINDER OF OUR CALL TO BE PEACEMAKERS IN CHRIST'S NAME.

THE APOSTLE PAUL PRAYED FOR TRUE PEACE IN HIS WORDS TO THE CHURCH IN ROMANS 15:5-6:

"MAY THE GOD OF STEADFASTNESS AND ENCOURAGEMENT GRANT YOU TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER IN ACCORDANCE WITH CHRIST JESUS, SO THAT TOGETHER YOU MAY WITH ONE VOICE GLORIFY GOD, THE FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST."

IT SEEMS THAT IT IS THIS TIME OF YEAR CHRISTIANS HOPE MOST STRONGLY TO LIVE IN HARMONY AND PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND WITH THE WORLD.

ACTS OF GENEROSITY AND THE HOPE OF PEACE ARE MORE PUBLICALLY DISPLAYED DURING THIS SEASON OF THE YEAR.

EVEN OUR WORSHIP AND THE SANCTUARY IS OFTEN MORE LIVELY AND FESTIVE THAN NORMAL.

IN THE DISTANT PAST EVEN NATIONS WOULD CEASE HOSTILITIES, AT ON CHRISTMAS DAY.

SADLY SUCH MANIFESTATION OF THE PEACE OF CHRIST ARE LESS VISIBLE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY.

AND ACTUALLY, EVEN WHEN MUCH OF THE WORLD DID TRY TO COME TOGETHER AT CHRISTMAS, IT NEVER LASTED LONG.

THIS IS ONE REASON THE BIBLE CALLS FOR CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS TO PUT THEIR HOPE IN HIM AND NOT IN ANY PARTICULAR DAY OR SEASON OF THE YEAR.

YET THERE IS VALUE IN KEEPING CHRISTMAS IN WHATEVER WAY WE ARE ABLE.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN IT COMES TO JESUS AND KEEPING HIM IN OUR HEARTS.

VERSE TWO OF "O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM" SPEAKS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF JESUS BEING BORN IN OUR HEARTS, EVEN AS HE WAS ONCE BORN IN BETHLEHEM. LET'S LISTEN TO THE WORDS:

"HOW SILENTLY, HOW SILENTLY, THE WONDROUS GIFT IS GIVEN! SO GOD IMPART TO HUMAN HEARTS THE BLESSING OF HIS HEAVEN.

NO EAR MAY HEAR HIS COMING, BUT IN THIS WORLD OF SIN. WHERE MEEK SOULS WILL RECEIVE HIM STILL, THE DEAR CHRIST ENTERS IN.

O HOLY CHILD OF BETHLEHEM DESCEND TO US WE PRAY, CAST OUT OUR SIN AND ENTER IN. BE BORN IN US TODAY.

WE HEAR THE CHRISTMAS ANGELS, THE GREAT GLAD TIDINGS TELL, O COME TO US, ABIDE WITH US, OUR LORD, EMMANUEL."

TRULY THE GREATEST GIFT WE CAN GIVE TO ANOTHER, AND TOWARDS THE MAKING OF PEACE IN THE WORLD, IS TO PRAY FOR JESUS TO BE BORN IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW HIM.

AND TO PRAY HIS PRESENCE WILL GROW STRONGER IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO CALL HIM "LORD AND SAVIOR." INDEED, THE REASON FOR THE SEASON-THE SOURCE OF ITS CONTINUING POWER EVEN IN THE WORLD TODAY IS -THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF CHRIST WITHIN US AND OTHERS.

REV. CHARLES STANLEY, IN ONE OF HIS CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONS WROTE ABOUT GOD'S PEACE.

"THE PEACE GOD OFFERS IS NEVER BASED ON WHAT WE CAN DO OR ACHIEVE. IT IS BASED ON WHAT HE DID BY COMING TO EARTH AS A BABY.

HELPLESS, AND IN MANY WAYS DEFENSELESS, SO HE COULD PERSONALLY IDENTIFY WITH OUR JOY, HURTS, NEEDS, DESIRES, AND EMOTIONS.

THERE IS NO GREATER WAY FOR GOD TO EXPRESS HIS PERSONAL LOVE THAN TO GIVE ALL OF HIMSELF TO US, THIS IS OUR HOPE AND PEACE.

IT IS OUR CHRISTMAS GIFT GIVEN WITH LOVE SO TENDER AND DIVINE, THAT IT COULD ONLY BE CONTAINED IN THE PRECIOUS LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST."

THUS THE REAL PURPOSE OF CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IS TO DRAW CLOSER TO JESUS.

IT IS HE WHO REDEEMS OUR PAST, GIVES MEANING TO OUR PRESENT, AND HOPE FOR OUR FUTURE.

HIS IS THE PEACE THAT PASSES UNDERSTANDING, THE PEACE THAT IS BOTH PRESENT, AND IS YET TO COME.

LET US PRAY: LORD JESUS WE PRAY YOUR PRESENCE WILL FILL THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW YOU. MAY YOUR PEACE GROW IN OUR HEARTS, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT HELP US, TO BE INSTRUMENTS OF YOUR LOVE AND PEACE, SO THAT OTHERS WILL DRAWN TO YOU. ALL GLORY AND HONOR AND PRAISE BE TO GOD- FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

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