

Waiting for Heavenly Peace

This second Sunday of Advent brings us another theme that may not seem immediately congruent with our Gospel reading. Our theme is peace, most fitting as we wait to welcome the Prince of Peace. Yet, Luke introduces a messenger whose fiery prophecies will send shockwaves through the established order as he prepares the way for the coming Messiah. John the Baptist is hardly an ambassador for peace. So, where might we find peace in this passage?

In the first few lines of our reading, Luke describes that “established order” in which John and Jesus live. Caesar Tiberius, a cruel but shrewd ruler, is Emperor. Pontius Pilate, who is certainly no angel, serves as Tiberius’ governor in Judea. Pilate collaborates with Herod, a puppet king appointed by Tiberius to provide the appearance of local authority. Annas and Caiaphas are the high priests of the Temple who, willingly or not, do their best to placate their Roman conquerors. Together, these men form an invincible autocracy that viciously eliminates any rebels who attempt to rise against it. And yet, these years fall within the two centuries that historians have admiringly called the *pax romana*, or “Roman peace.”

Whatever criticism it deserves, there's no denying the Roman Empire’s accomplishments. The Roman passion for order produced a vast network of roads – some of which are still in use – a legal system that remains a model for much of the world, a hyper-efficient government, and a disciplined army. Its citizens appreciated the safety and stability that came with Roman rule. Early Christianity benefitted to some extent from the *pax romana*, which made it possible for a former Pharisee named Paul to travel around the Mediterranean Sea as he worked to convert the Gentiles to the faith of Christ. The problem with the *pax romana*, however, was that Rome imposed and maintained it by brutalizing the citizens of its conquered territories. Anyone who

dared to challenge Rome was viciously punished, up to and including crucifixion. For the Hebrew people, suffering under Roman domination, the *pax romana* was a false peace at best.

While preparing this sermon, and with no intent to shortchange our reading from Malachai, it struck me that the Hebrews' situation under Rome was not unlike what their ancestors endured as slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh, like Caesar, enjoyed absolute authority over his subjects, and didn't hesitate to punish would-be rebels. Like the Roman Empire, Egypt was stable and prosperous enough that the Hebrew people sometimes missed the comforts of their former lives when wandering in the desert after Pharaoh finally let them go. But Rome and Egypt were both dictatorships, ruled by tyrants who fancied themselves to be gods. The people could not free themselves, so any peace they enjoyed was a false peace that depended on their continued obedience to their capricious overlords. If they were to have genuine, lasting peace, only God could give it to them. Thank heaven, God did.

In both instances, God chose someone we might not expect to be his prophet. Although he grew up in Pharaoh's household, Moses was born a commoner, the son of Hebrew slaves. He was working as a shepherd when the great I AM called to him out of the burning bush. Moses didn't start out as an impressive figure. Putting aside Charlton Heston's grandiose portrayal of him in *The Ten Commandments*, by his own admission Moses was "slow of speech and tongue" at first. But Moses grew into the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, rescuing his people from slavery, interceding for them with Adonai when they stumbled, and delivering the body of law that the Pharisees, Annas and Caiaphas among them, labored so diligently to enforce.

John the Baptist didn't come from earthly royalty either, but he had quite the pedigree. John was the only child of an elderly Pharisee and his wife; according to Luke, he was also Jesus's cousin. As the herald chosen to announce the coming of the Messiah, John would play

such a critical role in Jesus's story that his birth was announced to his father by the Archangel Gabriel himself. John, too, has been portrayed by Charlton Heston, in the epic film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. That probably says more about our idea of masculine authority than it reveals about Moses or John. But we do know that John was a powerful speaker who, like the hottest fire or the strongest soap, was chosen by God to purify the people before the arrival of their Savior.

So, what does all of this have to do with us, and with Jesus as our Prince of Peace? These stories confirm that our Creator cares about what happens to us and about what we do to one another. He doesn't often intervene as dramatically as he did when he rescued his chosen people from slavery in Egypt, or when he sent his Son to rescue all of us who follow him from the consequences of our worst actions. More often, God sends subtle hints or barely perceptible nudges in the right direction, giving us plenty of freedom to make good choices of our own free will. Sometimes he doesn't intervene at all, even when the things we do individually and collectively have to be breaking his heart. But we know he has come to us in spectacular fashion before, which means we can believe Jesus when he says he's coming back even though we don't know exactly when it will happen.

These stories also demonstrate that real peace isn't something human beings can achieve by building up their own nations and other institutions. It's not just governments that try to force their version of peace on people, as anyone who's ever worked for a controlling boss or lived with a dictatorial parent or partner can tell you. It's possible to achieve the appearance of peace for a period of time by forcing people to do as they're told, suppressing dissent, and making sure that the outside world sees only a perfectly agreeable façade. But, just like the *pax romana*, peace that's grounded in coercion is inherently false and fragile. Sooner or later, the façade crumbles, the truth surfaces and the false peace falls apart.

That means we can't rely on our fallible leaders and institutions to provide us with genuine, lasting peace. For that, we need to go to Jesus, whose peace is just as different from the world's understanding of peace as "a brief break in military hostilities" as Jesus himself was from the warrior king that the Hebrew people expected to deliver them from Rome. Jesus had no interest in driving the Romans out of Israel with military might. He sought instead to bring his people, the Romans, and everyone else together into a shared community that would be peaceful because it was built on divine love. The peace of Christ can't be diminished by the circumstances of our fallen world because it exists independent of those circumstances. The more we lean into our relationship with Jesus, the more we're able to receive his peace even when the world is doing its utmost level best to blow itself to smithereens.

That's not to say that we shouldn't try to bring more peace into the world. In a season where so much is in turmoil, we can agree with former President Franklin D. Roosevelt that "if civilization is to survive, the principles of the Prince of Peace must be restored. Shattered trust between nations must be revived ... There must be positive endeavors to preserve peace." But as C.S. Lewis observed in *Mere Christianity*, "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither ... We shall never save civilisation as long as civilisation is our main object. We must learn to want something else even more." That "something" we must want, I believe, is to see the peace of Christ wash over everyone, those whom we already love and those whom we don't quite yet. We must pray for the entire world to be healed and protected by heavenly peace, not just our little neighborhood or our personal circle of loved ones. And so, as we wait for the return of the Prince of Peace in this Advent season, our task is no less than to aim at Heaven, praying for true peace to come to all the world and listening for the voice of the prophet who assures us that, one glorious day, everyone shall see the salvation of God. Amen.