

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2017

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

“After a very long and boring sermon the congregants filed out of the church saying nothing to the preacher. Towards the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons.” Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!” The pastor was thrilled. “No-one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why.” “Well – it reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!”

Today on our Second Sunday of Advent, the theme is peace, whether it be personal or universal, real or imagined, lasting or temporary -- it is almost always a theme of the answer “this is what I want for Christmas.” Many Christmas carols carry the thought of peace, from “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day’s” peace on earth, goodwill to all, to “Silent Night’s” sleep in heavenly peace... to “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’s” peace on earth, and mercy mild to “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear’s” when peace shall o’er all the earth its ancient splendors fling.ⁱ It is so common a word in Christmas hymns that we probably don’t even take note of it any longer, even though Christ is seen as the Prince of Peace, a title he inherits from the portion of Isaiah, Chapter 9 that recognizes him as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy and the One who is the leader of peace in this lifetime and offers it to others then, later by his death, and now as we recall the words and signs he brings to a broken world. The Hebrew word for “peace,” *shalom*, is often used in reference to an appearance of calm and tranquility of individuals, groups, and nations. The Greek word, *eirene*, means “unity and accord”; St. Paul uses *eirene* to describe the objective of the New Testament church. But the deeper, more foundational meaning of peace is “the spiritual harmony brought about by an individual’s restoration with God.”ⁱⁱ So in singing all these Christmas hymns, if they are indeed “theologically correct” is that we hope the world and we, as well, will find in the birth of a child who many believe is the Son of God a unity and closeness to God that will inspire us to be one with each other.

In pondering all this, I wondered what is the greatest song written about peace? The one we probably know best is “Let There Be Peace on Earth and Let It Begin with Me,” or perhaps “Peace Is Flowing Like a River,” but I was hoping to find something on the Internet that was meatier, less mundane and less over produced. For the amount of songs written about peace for the world, one would think that we would have a lot more of it. The list of armed ongoing conflicts in the world is too grand even to quote in a small space here, but the unrest in places like Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Mexico make the top fourⁱⁱⁱ with scores of thousands of casualties. What words would make a difference were they heard round the globe? On the list of 10 (of course!) Best Peace Songs, I discovered a few that were surprising (“Over the

Rainbow” and What a Wonderful World), but rediscovered one that had completely slipped my mind. Written and recorded by the then ex-Beatle, John Lennon, “Imagine” speaks of timeless images and longings for a world free to be the best of the Created Order. I thought that on the anniversary of his death on December 8, in 1980, at the hands of a deranged assassin, we would do well to consider his words once again.

1. Imagine

John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today (ah ah ah)

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one^{iv}

Perhaps it will find its way into future hymnals (it has a haunting, melodic tune, also). As we prepare for the arrival of the Prince of Peace, it has a particular poignancy.

I wonder as I wander, to steal from an Advent/Christmas theme, why peace is so elusive. It could be that it is because love is so hard to come by that this is just a relative result of an impossible state of being. In other words, where there is no love there can be no peace. Yet we say that both are important to us, and that we want to imagine a life where both have a reality.

Aru Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Ghandi, wrote in a recent article titled *Why is Peace Elusive?*^v that he believes until we understand the nature and effects of anger, and that poverty is a violence against humanity, and until we come to realize in addition that non-violence is not the opposite of violence then peace for the world does not stand a chance. Other writers I looked at related that gender plays a major role in the way we are indoctrinated toward violence, and how it is hard to undo thousands of centuries of enculturation with merely a change in personal attitude, even should we all agree to it. Still other writers talk about the sin of greed and how it is built into our characters to the point where peace will never find its home within us. And finally, if war achieves peace it is the peace of the graveyard, says Gandhi.^{vi} So what is to be done?

I think back to the story of the fighting of WWI on a crisp, clear morning just over 100 years ago, when Pope Benedict XV, who took office in September of 1914, called for a Christmas truce, an idea that was officially rejected. Yet it seems the sheer misery of daily life in the cold, wet, dull trenches was enough to motivate troops to initiate the truce on their own. A huge range of differing oral accounts, diary entries and letters home from those who took part make it virtually impossible to speak of a “typical” Christmas truce as it took place across the Western front. To this day historians continue to disagree over the specifics: no one knows where it began or how it spread, or if, by some curious festive magic, it broke out simultaneously across the trenches. Nevertheless, some two-thirds of troops — about 100,000 people — are believed to have participated in the legendary truce.

Most accounts suggest the truce began with carol singing from the trenches on Christmas Eve, “a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere”, as Pvt. Albert Moren of the Second Queens Regiment recalled, in a document later rounded up by *The New York Times*. Graham Williams of the Fifth London Rifle Brigade described it in even greater detail: “First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing – two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war.” The next morning, in some places, German soldiers emerged from their trenches, calling out “Merry Christmas” in English. Allied soldiers came out warily to greet them. In others, Germans held up signs reading “You no shoot, we no shoot.” Over the course of the day, troops exchanged gifts of cigarettes, food, buttons and hats. The Christmas truce also allowed both sides to finally bury their dead comrades, whose bodies had lain for weeks on “no man’s land,” the ground between

opposing trenches. In the hundred years since, the event has been seen as a kind of miracle, a rare moment of peace just a few months into a war that would eventually claim over 15 million lives.^{vii} But it did prove that peace is not elusive, even if it be for a few moments on a dark and dreary night of fighting in enemy camps. And it demonstrates how the power of music can make a difference. Who would ever have thought that “O Come All Ye Faithful” was a hymn of peace?

In closing, I leave you with this prayer for peace by the poet John Birch:

We are molded, each one of us,
in the image of God,
and within our souls there is a fingerprint
none can erase.
We pray for those who have no regard
for anyone but self,
who put no value on human life.
For nations and individuals who abuse and kill.
We are not called to be judge or jury,
but we are called to be agents of change,
and if the butterfly that flaps its wings
should be our attitude to others
then so be it, Lord,
and may the hurricane this generates
somewhere within the world
reach into the hearts and souls of those
for whom we pray, and reveal to them
how precious are those
for whom they have no love,
and how precious are they
who now bring tears to the eyes of God.^{viii}

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me (says St. Paul)... put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Amen.

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ⁱ *Chalice Hymnal*, various hymns.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Prince-of-Peace.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts

^{iv} <http://www.metrolyrics.com/imagine-lyrics-john-lennon.html>

^v Gandhi, Arun. "Why is Peace Elusive," at

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Farungandhi.org%2Fresources%2FWhy%2BIs%2BPeace%2BElusive.doc>

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} <http://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

^{viii} http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_peace.htm