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# And On Earth, Peace

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*Text: Luke 2:14*

I know that Christmas is still a couple of months away. But there is one gift of Christmas that I would like to open now. It is the gift of peace. In the night sky over Bethlehem the angels proclaimed God's blessing of peace upon the folk of the earth. That gift of peace came in the flesh and blood form of a tiny babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. As such, it is a living testimony to peace in the Biblical sense as being not just the absence of war, but rather, safety and security, harmony and goodwill, justice and righteousness.

I am going to challenge you this morning to open up that gift of peace. I am going to do this by putting a most painful question to you. The question is ugly and blunt and offensive.

How will your children die? Will they live to a ripe old age like Abraham? Will they live out their three score and ten years? Or will they die young and violently? Those of you who are under twenty, how do you think you will die? And at what age?

These questions plunge us right into the center of peace by forcing us to examine the opposite reality of one possible future we will pass on to our children. I was confronted with a question like this a couple of months ago in a university class. Our professor handed out paper and crayons and asked us to draw two images; one of sex and the other of death. And then we were to break up into small groups and address the question of which image was the more difficult to draw.

Now, being clergy, you would think that the subject of death would be the less difficult for me to sketch. As a pastor, I have

sat with many folk who were dying. I have sat with their families. One of my professional functions is to preside over funerals. I have been trained to minister to the dying and their loved ones. And even more significantly, as a Christian I believe that my death will not be the final end, but rather, the gateway to eternal life.

But on this particular evening I was stuck. The crayon in my hand would not even join with the paper. So I turned to sex. And there I drew a beautiful scene of a lakeshore in the summer. And then the words of Jesus came to mind where he talked about the mustard seed growing into a large plant, a plant that was so great that the birds of the air came and found shelter in the shade of its branches. I sketched out an oak tree by the lake and in the shadows of this great tree I drew a picture of myself, my wife, and our newborn son, Adam.

We were all holding hands. It was a picture of biblical peace. It was a scene of safety and security, of peace in the heart, peace with God, peace in the home, peace between all the folk of the world, and peace with nature.

As I was drawing the stick figure of my son Adam I suddenly shuddered and the reason for my block around death became apparent. I was not so troubled with my *own* death as I was by the possible death of our *son*. As I contemplated the manner of Adam's end I put the crayon to the paper and drew a large black mushroom cloud looming over a pile of rubble that was once a city. And in the bottom right hand corner I placed a cross. Beneath the cross I wrote the name of our son, "Adam."

Will Adam die in that way? I surely hope not. But reality forces me to consider the possibility. Am I the only parent who worries about the future we are passing on to our kids? What about you young people? Do you wonder about the future and what will happen? Surveys have shown that a majority of young people today believe that they will die in a nuclear war before the year two thousand. That is only twelve Christmases away.

But war does not have to be a future reality. The incarnation of God has shown us both the hope and the vision of peace. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness will abide in the fertile field. And the work of righteousness will be peace, and the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence

forever. Then my people will live in a peaceful habitation (32:16-18).

Steel for the weapons of war will be hammered into the implements of peace. That is the Christmas gift of peace. The blood of our sons and daughters does not have to stain the waters of the Persian Gulf. Their flesh does not have to lie rotting in some jungle swamp. And their ashes do not have to glow in the dark of a nuclear winter. The babe in the manger has shown us an alternative.

Some of you, as you listen to me, may be asking yourselves, "Pastor, Christmas will be the season to be merry. What has this subject of how our children will die have to do with the joy of this Christmas season?" Others of you may be asking, "What has peace got to do with the birth of our Saviour?" And others of you may be wondering if you took a wrong turn this morning and ended up at a political convention instead of a church service. And I suppose there may be some of you who are wondering if I am some kind of pinko socialist masquerading as a pastor.

Well, you do not have to be a socialist to worry about the future of your children and how they might die. Liberals, NDPs, and Conservatives, atheists and agnostics, Muslims and Hindus no doubt worry about the same thing. I believe that there is not a single parent on the face of this planet who would want to receive a letter from the Department of National Defence beginning with the words: "The Dept. of National Defence deeply regrets to inform you..." There are probably some of you here today who have received just such a telegram in the past. You know better than anyone in our generation what the impact of those words are.

But let us take a closer look at the question of the relationship between peace, war, and the birth of our Lord. Just how does the birth of Jesus address the issue of a future possibility of peace? The very manner in which the birth transpired is in itself a gift of peace. The Lord did not enter the world with sword in hand. He did not walk into Bethlehem like Sylvester Stalone or Arnold Schwarzenegger, sweat dripping from those bulging biceps, bandoleers of bullets draped across the massive Neanderthal chest, grenades hanging from designer jeans, bayonet between the teeth, rifle in his hands pumping lead into

anything that moves, sowing the seeds of death and destruction in the name of peace. And no fifty megaton I.C.B.M.s fell out of the heaven onto the sleeping city to announce his arrival.

No. Jesus appeared via the womb of a woman, just like our children and us. A defenceless infant at the mercy of all the forces of evil, born in a manger. It is such a beautiful scene that would warm even the coldest heart. I remember going out to my uncle's farm for Christmas one year. It was an amazing treat for this city slicker to accompany his uncle out to the barn in the evening after supper to milk the cows. I remember walking in silence across the yard hearing the snow crunch underfoot and looking up into a sky so clear it seemed as though I could reach out and grab hold of a star. The cows would already be in their stalls when we walked into the barn and my uncle would fork out the hay and then sit down on a milking stool and begin his work. It was so quiet. I loved it.

The very manner in which our Lord came into this world symbolized the gift of peace. But his life was short and he died violently, on a cross. But as violently as his life was given up, even then, it symbolized a quality of peace. He did not go like a John Wayne, taking as many with him as he could. But rather, with a simple, "It is finished." The Son of God did not kill for the sake of peace. Rather, he was killed for the sake of peace.

Our peace. Our peace that comes with the knowledge that God loves us and forgives our sins. Our peace that flows from the knowledge of eternal life with him. Our peace that may grow into a future construction of peace between neighbors and nations.

You see, the gift of peace is like the seed of the mustard plant, that when planted will grow in our hearts and spread into our relationships with others. It will even spread outward across time reaching into the future through our children.

How? Christmas is just around the corner and your kids are probably running to you with requests for gifts. Gifts like a G.I. Joe doll, or a Transformer, or a Master of the Universe. Maybe they want a toy rifle or grenade launcher. Or a video game based on the theme of war.

Well, I am going to ask you to do something that will probably anger them. I am going to ask you to ignore those innocent requests for a weapon of war.

You say, "Why should I do that? My kids will climb the wall. Besides, these toys are just fantasies. They are just plastic and harmless." Yes, that is true, they are just toys. But wrapped around those toys, like a coiled rattlesnake, is a system of values that will plant the seed of violence in your child and predispose him or her to see might as the answer to the problems of the world. They will see the best solution to evil in this world lies in a hundred megaton Pershing Two designed to blow those godless commies all the way into a nuclear hell.

Children are more violent when they play with violent toys. So much so, that it is standard policy in the daycares not to allow toy rifles on the premises. Remember, the child with the plastic rifle in his or her hands today will be the next generation's voter. The worshippers of Rambo will be the politicians and policymakers of tomorrow. The child with the G.I. Joe doll will be the soldier lying in some trench, his or her own blood spilling into the dirt.

It is not a pretty thing to think about. But planting the seeds of violence in our children today will produce a harvest of their blood down the road.

Would it not be nice to know that our children have succeeded where we have failed, by building a world of peace? That the gift of peace we have given them for Christmas germinated a vision of peace in their hearts and down the road a world of peace was harvested? We have the choice before us now. In the hymn "Lord Christ, When First You Came to Earth" (L.B.W., 421) the third verse puts the gift of peace into our hands and challenges us to open it up: "New advent of the love of Christ, will we again refuse you, till in the night of hate and war we perish as we lose you?" Amen.