

“What Are You Waiting For?”

Isaiah 26:1-8 • Romans 5:1-11

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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For many people, this is one of the busiest and most stressful times of the year. There's the shopping, trying to find the perfect gifts. And it comes with all those crowds and the traffic. There's hauling out all the Christmas decorations and then putting them all away in a few weeks. There's the baking and cooking and cleaning and entertaining people at your house. It's no wonder 45% of people surveyed ranked Christmas right up there with changing jobs or moving as the most stressful events in their life. Some of you are getting anxious right now just thinking about it.

That's on top of the regular, every-day busyness and stress of life. There's still soccer practice and doctor's appointments. Turn on the news and you see the violence all around us. Wars. Protests. Fires. Storms. Addictions. Broken relationships. Cancer. And we come to church at Christmas and hear the angel say to the shepherds, "Peace on earth," and we think, "where is the peace?"

In the midst of this busyness and stress and anxiety, especially the stress of Christmas, it's important for us to stop and focus on what's really important. In the church we traditionally call this season Advent. The word advent means "coming" or "arrival," and the focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. I don't know about you, but I can't stand to wait. If there's a line for something, I'm not interested. I don't like to wait in the doctor's office, or in traffic. I just can't stand waiting. But Advent is a time of waiting for the arrival of Jesus.

Advent reminds us that there is more to life than the hectic busyness and 24-hour news cycle. Instead of our usual hurried busyness, Advent reminds us to slow down and focus on Jesus by reflecting on a different aspect of our relationship with Him each week. When we slow down enough to think about it we find

that the things we really want and need the most are things we can only truly receive through Christ: hope, peace, love, and joy.

Today I want us to think about hope and peace. They are closely related, I think. In our modern society we tend to view peace as either the absence of war or conflict, OR we think of some warm, fuzzy feeling of tranquility. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself." Emerson captures the way the world sees peace. It's something we must make ourselves.

According to the website "world peace newsletter dot com," there are 4 steps to world peace. First, "find peace within yourself." I'm not sure how you do that. It seems to me that if you knew how you wouldn't need their website. Apparently, according to this website, the way to find peace within yourself is by looking at pictures of kittens and flowers and waterfalls. They've selected some for you to help get you started. Second, you are to "teach others the ways of peace," which I guess means you're supposed to email the pictures of the kittens to everyone you know. The third step to world peace is to "help those less fortunate than yourself," which they point out means even those people you may be at "war" with. Now, if you've found inner peace and shared it with others I can't imagine that you would still be at war with someone, but maybe it's your coworker who's tired of getting all your emails of pictures of kittens. The last step – I'm not making this up – you need to strive to evolve. I don't have a clue what that means. Maybe you're supposed to actually become a kitten.

Whatever it means, it's a long way from what the Bible means by peace. As our passage from Romans tells us, real peace means being in a right relationship with God, and that only comes through Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Very early in the Bible we're told

how we became enemies of God, separated from Him through sin and shattering the peace of the Garden of Eden. The rest of the Bible is really about God's faithfulness to save us in spite of all the ways we try to screw it up. That's really the source of our anxiety. Often times our busyness is an attempt to distract ourselves from our own sin. John Calvin commented that our "souls are always uneasy unless they rest in the grace of Christ."

This is where hope comes in. Paul reminds us in verse 2 that real hope is the hope of the glory of God and you and I can rejoice in it. Hope is not just wishful thinking. We've talked about this before. Biblical hope is based on the promises of God and the Holy Spirit is our guarantee. Even when things aren't going well for us we can still rejoice in this hope that we are in God's hands. That's what Paul means when he says, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been give to us."

Pastor and author Lloyd Ogilvie puts it this way: "peace is not only a gift of Christ, it is Christ Himself living His life in us." This is why peace is included as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. When Christ fills us with His Spirit, our lives and our behaviors change. We begin to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God, which implies a process of growth or development that depends on our cooperation.

So how do we really get that sense of hope and peace that we desperately need this Christmas season? Our reading from Isaiah 26 gives us some clues. Verse 3 says, "You keep

him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock." Now this is important. If you are going to stay, or focus, your mind on God, that means you have to clear out whatever else is competing for your thoughts. Here's what I want you to do. Every day, twice a day, spend 10 minutes focused entirely on Jesus. Turn off all your electronics – computer, phone, TV, music, everything. I promise you'll survive. Ask God to meet you there in that moment. Then spend the first three minutes in total silence. Try not to think about anything except Jesus. If your mind tends to wander, like mine does, use a single word to refocus you. After those three minutes, spend the next 5 or 6 minutes reading part of the story of Jesus' birth from Matthew or Luke. When you're finished, spend the last 2 minutes in prayer.

The second thing you can do this Advent to help you have that sense of peace that passes understanding is to come each Wednesday evening to our Advent gathering. There's a light supper, some worship music, and a brief video with discussion. We start at 5:30 and we're done before choir practice starts at 7. Here's the thing. Throughout Romans 5 Paul uses plural pronouns. "*we* have been justified by faith, *we* have peace with God...*we* rejoice in hope." The Christian faith is a team sport. The Church is called the Body of Christ. What that means is that the peace you and I long for is most available to us when we're together.

So this Advent, discover the hope and the peace you need and want by anticipating the arrival of Jesus. What are you waiting for?

Amen.