

ADVENT 2C Dec. 5, 2021

TEXT: Luke 1: 76-79

TITLE: “True Peace”

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I want to begin with a quote – not from the Bible, but from the Criminal Code of Canada: “Disturbing the peace is any disorderly conduct in a public place, such as (a) discharging firearms, fighting, screaming, shouting, swearing, singing or using insulting or obscene language; or (b) being drunk; or (c) impeding or molesting people.” In other words, any bad behaviour may lead to “summary court conviction” on the word of a “peace officer”. When police and courts enforce these law, it’s a sort-of peace.

Our federal government’s responsibility is summarized in the motto: “peace, order and good government”. But can you legislate peace? Many governments have tried!

In history, the government that was the most successful in legislating peace was the Roman government under the great Caesar Augustus. He was the ruler of the vast Roman Empire when Jesus was born. And there was a kind of peace throughout the Empire (in Latin, it was called the “pax Romana”). But this “peace” was only because Roman law was so well-enforced, and because the Emperor Augustus was so powerful and intelligent, and he was careful to appoint governors in each country who granted just enough freedom and self-government to keep the citizens satisfied, so they rarely rebelled against this enforced peace and stability. And, if there was any rebellion, it was ruthlessly crushed and its leaders crucified.

Caesar was so beloved by Roman citizens that they called him the “Prince of Peace” and considered him a god. And that was fine in those days, because religion was part of the fabric of society, and people believed in many gods. The common greeting on the street was “Caesar is Lord”. . . and the reply was “Hail, Caesar.” (No surprise, therefore, that the Romans were quite upset when Christians went around saying, “Jesus is Lord”. It was treason against their great Leader, whose huge statue and shrine was prominent in all the many provinces of the Empire. Many were inscribed with the words, “God and peacemaker and saviour of the world.” Hail Caesar.

Although that huge and great empire was at peace on the surface, underneath it was rife with evil and unrest of spirit. It reminds me of the words of several Old Testament prophets, who warned of kings and religious leaders who proclaimed: “peace, peace, when there is no peace.”

True peace exists only within: when we have peace of mind, and emotional calmness, and serenity of spirit. It was for this peace that the Prince of Peace was born. What is needed in every generation is shalom, which means peace, tranquility, harmony, wholeness, etc. Shalom is a key theme in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus came to bring shalom to our hearts and our lives, through the forgiveness of sins, through transformative love, and through the hope of eternal life when this short life is over. God came into the world as Jesus, to make this peace real and accessible to us. As the old song says, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

It amazes me that so many people don’t want this peace. Even in churches, you meet people who are uptight and have a combative spirit. They seem always to want to fight

verbally, to be contrarian and to win arguments. Perhaps they have such low self-esteem, or feel so powerless, that only winning makes them happy. With some people, it almost seems as if they would lose their purpose for living if they had no enemy to fight. Competing can be fun, as we know with sports, but if it's an obsession within you, it robs you of your inner peace.

In fact, being obsessive or compulsive about anything disturbs one's peace. I know that from personal experience. I'm a compulsive worrier. Whether I have any reason to worry or not. It seems to be a bad habit I've had, ever since I can remember. Perhaps an addiction, which I can blame on my mother (no, no, that's just a little joke). I think underneath my worry is anxiety, a constant, low level of anxiety.

And, in our world today, there's a lot to be anxious about! In the front section of yesterday's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, there's an article about widespread "eco anxiety" among children and youth, and how parents can discuss it with their children and (quote) "guide worried kids through uncharted territory involving an existential threat". In one British study, 10,000 people between the ages of 16 and 25 in ten different countries, three-quarters of them said they were "worried" or "extremely worried".

In the same section of the paper, there was a headline that read: "Alberta's anxiety runs high despite oil's price rebound". And a third article, near the end of this same section of the paper, talked about people's "anxiety and depression" over the new Covid-19 variant. We are getting bad news just as we were getting our hopes up that we might be able to get back to normal, to travel normally and meet normally and so on.

Well, the normality now seems to be anxiety. And anxiety is a kind of fear. And fear, I think, is the greatest disturber of our inner peace. No wonder Jesus kept reassuring his disciples: "Fear not, I am with you."

I want to mention one other thing that can disturb our peace, and that is a compulsion to control. For some people, it manifests itself in a compulsion to have everything in their lives in perfect order and regularity. I mean, we all hate chaos, and we need some semblance of order to stay sane, but when it becomes an obsession, it's time for some counselling, some remedial treatment.

For other people, the compulsion to control manifests itself in aggressiveness: the fight to control financial resources, their own or others'. Some people aggressively try to control members of their family, or members of an organization they belong to. . . I can tell you, there's nothing more troublesome in a family, or in a church, than having a member who's a control freak.

Well, these are some of the things that can disturb our inner peace.

The important thing is: how we find peace of mind, peace in our hearts and in our spirit, serenity in the midst of all the troubles and chaos and disturbances in the world outside, and even in the world within our own head.

Well, I believe it comes down to two main things. The first is faith. To be able to relax and trust that God holds our future in his hands. (Again, a song comes to mind: "He's got the whole world in His hands.") To have faith is to believe, simply to trust, that is, to let go and let God have his way. As we relax and trust our Creator and Preserver, we

will find peace. We will feel secure in the midst of uncertainty, in the midst of weakness, in the midst of things we cannot control. Thus the famous prayer goes: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

So, that's one source of inner peace: deep faith. The other source of peace is deep love. . . being surrounded by love: from relatives who love us; from friends who love us; and most of all from God who loves us unconditionally – the Creator God who proved his love on the stage of this world, by sacrificing his beloved Son to atone for all our sins and give us peace. This is the God who has surrounded us with love and blessing in our past, and still surrounds us with love at this very moment, this moment of peace.

Because God has loved you deeply in the past, and loves you deeply right now, you can say, "Ergo, God will love me in the future." God is faithful; God is constant; God is eternal.

Our Advent wreath has a candle of hope, a candle of peace, a candle of joy, and a candle of love. But (as Saint Paul said): "The greatest of these is love." You are loved. Therein is the greatest peace.

Amen.