

A SEASON OF PEACE

Selected Scripture

Introduction:

Today is the second week of Advent. If we were using an advent wreath, we would have lit the second candle today. That candle is often called the Bethlehem candle, or the candle of peace. It is only 3 weeks until Christmas Day. I wonder, what is life like for you? Is it a time of peace? Or is it all busyness and rushing and conflict?

This morning I want us to look for just a few moments at this town of Bethlehem and the promise of peace, and see how the two are connected. But first a bit of background about the town itself.

The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread." Bethlehem today is a small city with about 60,000 people in the immediate vicinity. Currently, it is in what is called the West Bank, under the control of the Palestinian Authority. It is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem.

In Bible times, Bethlehem was also called Ephrathah or Bethlehem-Judah to distinguish it from another town named Bethlehem, which was in the territory of Zebulun. It dates to the time of the ancient Canaanites and was situated on a well-travelled caravan route.

It was the birthplace of King David and eventually became known as the City of David. However, by the time of Jesus' birth it had declined in significance and size to just a small village.

Now, on this second Sunday of Advent, let's consider, in a bit more detail, Bethlehem's history and the promise of peace. Much of what you will hear this morning is not new. I have shared much of this before.

Bethlehem – a place of pain

Bethlehem actually has a long history of pain and trouble. In many ways, it seems like the most unlikely place to be associated with peace.

In Gen. 35 we find the first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible. It was in the region where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. (review

the incident – vv. 16-20) It was there near Bethlehem that Rachel was buried, and Jacob mourned for his wife.

There is another significant mention of Bethlehem. It is found in the book of Ruth. Read Ruth 1:1-2 – Elimelech moves his family from Bethlehem to Moab, because of a famine in the land. While in Moab, Elimelech died. Their two sons also died. But Naomi eventually returned to her home in Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth after several years in Moab (read vv. 19-21). For Naomi Bethlehem was a place associated with bitterness and pain. There was the pain of famine that had driven them away, and there was the pain of coming home with the grief of having lost her husband and her two sons.

There is one other Scriptural reference, I would like to mention in connection with Bethlehem and its surrounding region. It is found in Jeremiah 31:15 – "Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

In the context of this verse, the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel is identified with Rachel weeping for her sons, Joseph and Benjamin. It refers to Ramah, which was actually a town about 5 miles north of Jerusalem, while Bethlehem was 5 miles south. However, there is a region between Jerusalem and Bethlehem traditionally called Ramah. So again you have this area around Bethlehem associated with pain and suffering. Matthew makes this association between Ramah and Bethlehem in ch. 2:18 when he quotes this verse in reference to the order of Herod to kill the children in the region of Bethlehem, in his attempt to destroy the Christ Child.

Matt 2:17-18 "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.'"

So, Bethlehem is very much associated with pain and suffering. It was a place of sorrow, grief and loss. Yet, despite all of this, Bethlehem was the place chosen by God to be the birthplace of the Messiah, the one who was to be called the Prince of Peace.

Bethlehem – a place of peace

Go to Micah 5, read vv. 2-5a. – “...he shall be their peace.”

Imagine the scene in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus birth:

- the edict from Rome for everyone to register for taxation
- hundreds of people in a little town like Bethlehem for the registration
- The inn in Bethlehem – overcrowded with travellers – probably a lot of noise and short tempers.
- Joseph desperately looking for a place with quiet and privacy for Mary to rest and give birth to her baby.

It certainly did not seem like a place of peace. It is hard to imagine much peace in the hearts of Mary and Joseph as they settled into the stable that night. And yet ... that night, with all of the hustle and bustle of a busy crowded village not far away, the Prince of Peace entered this weary world.

Look for a moment at the cry of the angels that night just before they left the shepherds. Luke 2:14 – “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace** among those with whom he is pleased.”

No, the world into which Jesus came was not particularly peaceful, but he came to bring peace. Some 33 years later, just near the end of Jesus’ life here on earth, he said to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27) “... my peace ... not as the world gives ...”

The world does not offer peace. The world offers only war, violence, crime, discontent, financial worry, economic disaster. On Friday as I worked on this message, I went to the internet. My web browser opens to the Google News page. Here are a few of the headlines that came up:

- **ISIS to step up attacks on Europe, report warns**
- **Halifax police respond to barricaded person**
- **Shooting of Roughrider Joe McKnight under investigation**
- **Canadian couple among 13 killed in Tennessee wildfires**
- **Homicide unit investigates after body found in wooded area**

That is just a few of the headlines from across Canada and around the world. Our world does not seem very peaceful. People are worried and upset. People and nations are in conflict, fighting, at war with one another. We don’t see much in the way of peace. But the peace that Jesus came to give is different than the peace the world talks about. The peace He offers is possible even when there is no outward peace.

We read in Micah the assurance, “...he shall be their peace.” That promise was made to God’s chosen people, the nation of Israel. I want to take you quickly to a couple of passages in the NT that extend that promise to all of us. First, turn to Eph. 2:11-18 (*read it*). “For He himself is our peace...” (v. 14) Peace to the Jew and to the Gentile – v. 17.

Now turn over to Colossians 1:15-22 (*read it*).

What does this mean for us? It means we can be reconciled to God. It means that peace has been established between two parties who were estranged – you and God.

Salvation application and invitation. Through the cross of Christ we are invited into a relationship of peace with God. Jesus came into the world in a stable, in a troubled and noisy little town called Bethlehem to bring peace to a troubled world, and to bring peace to troubled hearts.

Prayer – invitation