

# Peace by Piece

December 8, 2019

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## Luke 1:68-79

<sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. <sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

## Isaiah 11:1-9

<sup>1</sup>A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup>The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. <sup>3</sup>His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; <sup>4</sup>but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. <sup>5</sup>Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

## Sermon

At home, the front of our refrigerator is covered with magnetic words. They come in small boxes that hold a about 200 words ranging from “I” and “and” to words like “understand” and “question” and “surprise”. Their purpose in our house is yet another tool to encourage Harry in his language development and, well, the occasional random silly message we create and leave to see if the others will find it. These words sound like a great idea but they are not kept in alphabetical order or well, in any kind of order. They are merely a hodge-podge assortment where you have to stare at them a long time to find the words you need and even then, you are fortunate if you do. So on Wednesday of this week, I arrived home to Harry looking at the fridge. Now Harry often plays a game where he pulls the word “sad” and asks us to make a sad face or the word “happy” and asks us to make a happy face. He is also fascinated by the words cold and hot and pulls those magnets and uses them around the house. When he approached me on Wednesday night, I expected to see one of those words. As I prepared to make a sad face, Harry asked, “What’s this word?” and held the word up to me: it said peace. While we use that word at work a lot, it is not one we use a lot in our home vocabulary so I was struck that Harry picked it out. I have never heard Harry use that word and I was fascinated that he had chosen that word. The other reason I was intrigued was I had just walked in the door from work where I had been prepping for this morning and have been reflecting on peace...and here my child held a piece of peace in his hand. A piece of peace right there in his hand.

The world often defines peace as the absence of violence or the absence of war. But the biblical meaning is far deeper than that. In Hebrew, that language in which the Old Testament was written, the word is shalom and it means wholeness, well-being, peacefulness, and completeness. “Peace be with you” is the most common greeting in the Middle East and is still spoken today in Israel and Palestine by Muslims, Christians and Jews. It is a blessing and a wish for happiness and good health to those who greet each other.<sup>i</sup>

God's peace, then, is also more than an external condition (like violence or absence thereof). It implies an internal sense of all being well in our souls. The pursuit of peace reminds us that following Jesus into a life of peace involves our relationships with God, each other, and the earth, our physical health and mental well-being. It goes to the very core of who we are and who we are created to be. When we pass the peace of Christ in worship, when we say "the peace of Christ be with you" – through that practice we are actually praying a blessing on that person, asking that all parts of their life be (whole and complete) and they, in return, are asking the same for us. Peace means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself and everyone else having the same.

The irony of peace in our world today is not lost on me. It is hard to look beyond the idyllic understanding when our headlines scream otherwise. Where is peace when a woman in India is set on fire while she is on the way to testify in her rape trial? Where is peace when children are killed by bombs delivered to a Syrian marketplace? Where is peace when a young woman who had turned her life around and graduated from a special GED program on Friday, was killed by a stray bullet on the way to her first job on Monday? Where is peace when young people are taking their own lives at an alarming rate because of the stigma and availability of mental health care? Where is peace when the diagnosis comes and the outlook is not good? Where is peace in all the ugly, hurtful, violent ways of our world that doesn't seem like anything peaceful? We light this candle of peace, every year, and every year, it doesn't seem that there is any.

I think part of the problem is us. If you are like me – or, better yet, if your patience is like mine – you are looking for the fairy God mother to swoop in, wave her magic wand, and "poof" no more war, no more hatred, no more ugliness. But that is not how we often experience God. Remember, God broke into our world as a small, tiny baby born to an unexpected mother and father, in an unexpected place. Through Jesus, we are reminded of his life and death that have broken the powers over this world in unexpected ways and ushered in the movement towards the kingdom where the wolf and the lamb live together; where a small child will lead them, and where it grew like a small shoot that grows out of a stump of a tree. Lighting this candle of peace reminds us of what is now possible because God sent Jesus Christ into our world to begin to usher in a peaceable kingdom. God doesn't promise an immediate end to the sorrow and sadness and ugliness but invites us to share in the power of God's kingdom that has arrived and is being revealed in unexpected ways every day.

Naomi Shihab Nye, a poet and author whose father is a Palestinian Refugee and her mother a German-American, was travelling and fell victim to a delayed flight. She shares this story:

*In the midst of her delay, she overheard an announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately. Well—one pauses these days unsure of what will await them at the airport gate especially since gate 4-A was my own gate. But I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.*

*I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly in Arabic. The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late. Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him. We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest.*

*She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering. Questions.*

*She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.*

*And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers—non-alcoholic of course—and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, With green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.*

*And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, **This is the world I want to live in.** The shared world. Once the crying and confusion had stopped, Not a single person in this gate —has seemed apprehensive about any other person. I wanted to hug all those other women too. They took the cookies. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost!<sup>ii</sup>*

Friends, much like the shoot comes out of the stump of Jessie and the branch grows from the root – so emerges peace as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place; in an airport gate; in hand of a 12-year old child, even in a manger. It emerges in so many unlikely places and then it grows and grows and grows.

During this Advent season we light this candle of Peace and we remember the Peace of Christ that breaks into our world and makes acts of peace possible all around us. Lighting this candle helps us remember the Peace of Christ that cannot be squelched by the unpeaceful actions of our world – even though the world is trying so very hard to do so. We are to slow down and watch so we can remember the power of God who breaks into the messiness of our world and begins to transform it into the peaceable kingdom God intends. And then...now focused...we are given the opportunity to go back out into the world to join in that transformation that is already happening in our world...piece by peace.

May the peace of Christ be with you...and with me...and with the whole world...now and forever.

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<sup>i i</sup> (Timothy Beal, Florence Harkness Professor of Religion at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio)

<sup>ii</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye <https://www.csmd.edu/Assets/For-the-community/connections/SHIHAB%20NYE%20POETRY.pdf>