



The Gift of Peace

Isaiah 9:6, 11:1

1. Micah remembers the promise of shalom.

- Micah 2:9, 3:1-2, 4:3

2. The Messiah comes quietly.

- Micah 5:1-5a; Isaiah 11

3. Jesus is the peace giver.

- Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 1:78-79, 2:14; Romans 5:1

4. I am a peace bringer.

- Luke 10:5-9; Revelation 21:1-3; Micah 4:6-7

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Unwrapped: Peace¹

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I think that we can relate to what Mr. Scrooge was feeling – whatever moments of peace we manage to get during this busy season seems to always be interrupted by the noise of the celebrations and Santas and department store sales. But today we are talking about *peace*. We are in our series called “Unwrapped,” attempting to unwrap the real gifts of Christmas, by examining the big four traditional advent themes, one for each Sunday: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. These are the *real* gifts that we are given at Christmas. These are more than pleasant thoughts or ethereal words; these are real, tangible gifts that God has given us and that we can give others at Christmas. Today, we are talking about the real gift of *peace*.

Peace is the theme of God's promise of better days for our lives. That is the hope of Advent and Christmas, that God has done something in Christ that changes everything. God has given us promises of better days, promises which all were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. This week, we'll look at what the Old Testament prophet Micah has to say about the advent, or arrival, of Christ and about Shalom, or peace.

When I was a tenth grader at McNary High School in Keizer, Oregon, I remember feeling sorry for a guy named Doug. Doug was awkward, kind of pudgy, had thick glasses and pretty poor social skills. Doug was an easy target for high school bullies. People teased Doug until he would – as we called it – “spaz-out.”

I never actually participated in the teasing, but I certainly didn't stop it, either. That is, until one day when we were walking through the halls during lunch. In those days we couldn't leave the campus, and the school was two floors with hallways in a big square, with a courtyard in the middle. Everyone would walk around those halls until it was time for class, just going around and around that square. Freshmen and sophomores got the ground floor, and juniors and seniors got the second floor. Awkward Doug was trying to make it down the double set of stairs from his locker with his stack of books in his arms, heading to go hide out in his next hour class. Doug didn't do well roaming the halls because he'd get mercilessly mocked and taunted, so he'd hide during lunch. But on this day, as Doug was coming down the stairs, some guys had tripped him. He fell down about a half dozen stairs with his books and papers flying. They circled around him, shoving him down when he tried to get up and gather his papers and books. As I watched, something snapped inside me. I raced toward the circle and knocked two upper classmen over. I said, “Hey, if you want to knock down Doug, you'll have to go through *me*.” I had been lifting

¹ From a sermon by Matt Woodley, “The Peace Jesus Brings,” Editor, “Preaching Today.”

weights, so I was a bigger than a normal sophomore and fortunately for me they thought size was the same as being a good fighter so they backed off (lucky for me or they would've crushed me!). I helped Doug scoop up his papers and books and walked with him to his class. I wasn't even a Christian yet – it would be a year and a half later before that happened. But for the first time in my career as a high school student, I actually cared about something beyond myself. I was a freedom fighter against oppression and injustice!

That day in the high school halls, my heart cracked open. I looked around the world – or at least McNary High School – and a voice whispered into my ear, "This isn't right. It's not supposed to be this way. Violence and injustice should not have the upper hand. There has to be a better way." I had no idea where the voice came from at the time, but it was loud and clear and obvious. Of course if you go to any high school hallway, you'll eventually hear someone scream out: "Hey, that's not fair!" As New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has said, "A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human."

I didn't know it at the time, but the voice I heard in the high school hall was the same whisper that comes out of the pages of the Bible. It begins quietly, but by the time we reach the books of the prophets, the voice gets louder and louder. The voice of God, through those wild-eyed, visionary, peace-hungry prophets went something like this: "You were made for better days. The strong oppress the weak; the rich pummel the poor; nation goes to war against nation. But I, the Lord, have made you for better days, and I will bring those better days to pass."

The ancient Jews had a word to describe those better days. They called it *shalom*, Hebrew for "peace." In the Bible, God's peace – shalom – meant much more than simply the absence of war. It indicated more than a positive state in my soul or a private transaction between God and me. The longing for God's shalom did include those things, but for those radical Jewish believers, peace was *much* bigger and broader. Shalom meant not only inner peace or spiritual peace; it meant wholeness and completeness throughout all of creation. It meant the end of injustice. It meant the rich would no longer devour the poor. It meant all brokenness would be set right and healed. It meant that people would love one another. Shalom would flow deep and broad, embracing all of creation, including plants, animals, and the earth itself.

As the story of the Bible unfolded, God dropped clues that would awaken our hearts to long for better days. For the Jews, the hope of shalom was wrapped up in a *person*. Someone is coming, they believed, who would open the door to peace. The question was, who? The prophet Isaiah put it this way:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
(Isaiah 9:6, niv)

Two chapters later in chapter 11, God whispered again:

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will
bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1, niv)

Who is this bearer of Shalom? Where will he come from? The prophet Micah heard the whisper.

1. Micah *remembers* the *promise* of shalom.

The prophet Micah lived around the same time as Isaiah, about 700 years before Jesus was born. Micah lived in a mid-sized town called Moresheth, about 25 miles south of Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for "prophet" literally means, "to see;" like the other prophets, Micah saw things everyone else wanted to ignore. Micah saw things much worse than gangs of bullies beating up high school nerds in the halls. He records unspeakable violence and injustice in 2:9 and 3:1-2. Not only did this injustice outrage Micah, it also connected him once again with those ancient promises of better days. God whispered into his ear, "Remember, Micah; someone is coming who will bring peace."

As a result, the promises of better days pop up again and again in this short book. Micah describes the Coming One in 4:3 as someone who...

"Judges between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide." (Micah 4:3a, niv)

Under this person's leadership, the nations...

"...will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Micah 4:3b, niv)

This is a beautiful picture of deep and rich and wide *shalom*.

Perhaps many of us have echoed this longing for better days when we were 13 or 15 or 23, but then we got busy and decided to settle into "real life." Who has time to dream about better days when we're not sure how to make it through *this* day? We have bills to pay and kids to drive and term papers to finish and health problems to resolve and a retirement plan to build. The list of responsibilities goes on and on. Longing for peace, longing for justice, aching for better days – we just don't have time or energy anymore.

After all, if we actually looked long and hard at the world around us, or even if we just consider the current climate in our culture and our country, especially post-presidential election, we'd just get depressed and cynical. We've stopped longing for better days. Nevertheless, every once in a while something cracks our hearts wide open and a voice whispers, "You were made for better days. You long for peace because there is a peace-giver." So Micah reminds us...

2. The *Messiah* comes *quietly*.

In verse one of chapter five, Micah describes an Israelite king being publicly humiliated. He says: "They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek." Then in verse 3, the prophet describes the time when the nation of Israel would be conquered,

divided, and sent into exile. Micah compares these days of abandonment and groaning to a woman's groaning during childbirth, because into this violent and seemingly hopeless situation, there is a promise that God will send his peace bearer.

But Micah warns them that they'll have to look carefully or they might miss his coming, because when God brings peace, he will do it so quietly that they just might miss it. That's the way God's shalom comes: not with a marching band and hoopla and press coverage, but quietly and to unlikely people. In Isaiah 11 remember that God told us that the Messiah would come like a branch growing out of a dead stump. From generations of long dead kings, from death and decay suddenly the peace-bringer would arise. Now Micah tells us in 5:2 that the coming one, the Messiah, will come from a very quiet place: Bethlehem. Bethlehem literally means "house of bread," and it was a small, insignificant, backwater town.

Though Messiah will come from an insignificant place, he will nevertheless be God's peace giver. Verse 4-5 tells us:

“He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

How big and broad and all-encompassing God's shalom is! Finally, Micah says,

And he will be their peace." (Micah 5:4-5a, niv)

This promised shalom is wrapped up in *one person*. This reality we're aching and longing for that seems always out of reach has come, and it's wrapped up in a person, the Messiah. Who is it? Micah hits a dead end. He knows God's shalom is big and beautiful and real, and he knows it will come through someone sent by God. But Micah doesn't know *whom*; that will have to wait until Christmas:

3. Jesus is the *peace giver*.

Seven hundred years later, as it is recorded in our New Testament, there's a story about a strange birth. Someone is born, and the clues begin to point in the same direction. Just as Micah predicted, this peace bringer comes from Bethlehem: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the

exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.' After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." (Matthew 2:1-12, niv)

Is this connecting any dots for you?

Another witness proclaims the following about the Coming One:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79, niv)

When Christ comes, an entire host of angels start singing:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors." (Luke 2:14, niv)

Could it be? Is this the one all the clues were pointing to?

Around the globe on Christmas Eve, followers of Jesus will celebrate the coming of the peace that God intended for his creation – once lost because of sin and longed for by all creation – this peace has come in Jesus. He's the one Micah pronounced, who would be our peace.

This may all sound abstract and impersonal. You may wonder, *How does this affect my life?*

Several years ago I went on a fact-finding trip for the Nazarene Church in Cuba. The Church of the Nazarene was in Cuba and the door was just beginning to open up more for churches to come in and do work. I was there considering the possibility that our church would seek a partnership with a church there, but it wouldn't work for us; there were still too many restrictions and it was still not safe enough. Thankfully, the Lord led us instead to Guyana.

While we were in Cuba, we were followed everywhere we went – it was pretty obvious. And our rooms were all bugged – both with huge cockroaches and with electronic listening devices. So we had to be careful what we said and to whom. We had to make sure we all stayed with the group and didn't allow anyone to lure us away because they could be Cuban secret service who would whisk us off and we'd never be seen again.

A very curious thing happened when I was returning from that trip. We flew into Miami, and then of course from Miami to Seattle. On the flight from Miami to Seattle, I was fortunate that I had an empty seat next to me on the plane. But just at the last second before they closed the door, a dark haired man came rushing in and without

even looking sat down next to me. I have to tell you my radar was going off. Something just didn't seem right about this guy. He didn't say much. I pulled out a copy of the National Geographic magazine that I had purchased at the airport – the cover story just happened to be about Cuba and its changing culture. The guy asked me about Cuba and if I've been there. I told him that yes, I was actually just coming from there. He began to ask me all kinds of questions, not so much about Cuba as about what my attitude about it was; almost putting words in my mouth. Then, about ten minutes into it, he said, "So what good do you think your trip to Cuba did, Mike?" Now that was *weird*, because I had never told him my name. I continued to talk to him, but as I did, I was looking around to see if I left my ticket out or something else that had my name on it. Nope. Honestly, I wondered if the guy was either a spy for *us*, or a spy for *them*. I haven't told very many people this story because they might think I'm being paranoid. But then the guy asked me what I thought about the Cuban revolution. So I proceeded to tell him that we had gone there for a *spiritual* revolution; that all of us need peace with God, Cuban or otherwise. I went on the offensive and began asking questions about his life. He told me about his wife and son who was a young teenager, and about how their relationship was not good. I told him that he needed peace in his life and that it could only come best when he relied on the peace of Christ for his own life first. I told him that I was in Cuba because I wanted peace *everywhere* in the world. He stopped talking to me after that. But the message of Jesus – the revolution of peace that started on that first Christmas – means that peace has to start in *my* heart. I can't be an effective instrument for peace until I find peace within my relationship with God. According to the biblical story, everything Jesus did, including living, teaching, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead, *everything* Jesus did was designed to reconcile us with God the Father. The Bible tells us that our relationship with God was *not* at peace. As a matter of fact, the Bible tells us that we are at war with God. We're his enemies; we're not victims; we're rebels who must learn to lay down our arms and surrender if we ever hope to find real peace. That's why the New Testament declares so wildly and joyfully that peace has been offered:

"Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1, niv)

As a good Jew, the Apostle Paul was steeped in the story of the Bible, including the promise of *shalom* in Isaiah and Micah. Paul resisted the Good News for a long time, but then Jesus broke into his heart, and Paul knew that Jesus was the promised shalom-bearer he knew about from Scripture.

Unless I'm at peace with God, I'm not part of the solution; I'm still part of the problem. But in Jesus, I can become a peacemaker in this world. I can be an instrument of God's peace. Following Jesus is not simply a matter of enjoying peace in my heart or in my relationship with God. Messiah calls us to join his revolutionary movement of bringing shalom to a broken world.

4. I am a ***peace bringer***.

As a follower of Jesus, you and I are now called to announce the good news that others can be reconciled to God. We begin this peacemaking journey right in our homes and neighborhoods and families. Shalom-peace does not mean the absence of conflict; it means working through the conflict to bring peace into our relationships. It means we stand up for those who are treated with injustice. It means we ask for Messiah to bring his peace into our city and community.

Remember the story of when Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs to spread peace to communities? This is what Luke tells us: “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there...Do not move around from house to house.

When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them...

“The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Luke 10:5-9, niv)

Jesus, the peace giver, has given his peace to us – to every person who has accepted him and is a Christian. And now Christ sends us out to bring that peace to our community; into our neighbors’ homes and our neighborhoods. We declare the Kingdom of God – which is a New Testament phrase for the Old Testament *shalom*.

We do it in the confidence and hope that one day Shalom will be *everywhere*: God has a plan; God will bring his peace into each heart that receives Jesus and one day through us to the whole world. Remember from our series last summer in Revelation, the Apostle John records for us:

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” (Revelation 21:1-3, niv)

I’m sure many of you have seen in the news the tragic circumstances that led to Mr. Keith Scott being shot to death by police officers in Charlotte, North Carolina. Then, on Tuesday “R. Andrew Murray, the district attorney for Mecklenburg County, laid out a case that Mr. Scott, who was black, had a gun in his hands and had not heeded warnings to drop it when he was shot and killed.”² He announced there would be no prosecution of the police officers that shot Mr. Scott. As you can imagine, when we already have too many people being shot by police and our country is already too tightly wound with racial tension, that announcement and that decision led to protests and riots in the streets. Now I’m not here to give any kind of social commentary on that situation, as tragic as it is. But I do want to call attention to something that the protestors were saying: the protestors were desperate for some

² http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/us/charlotte-officer-acted-lawfully-in-fatal-shooting-of-keith-scott.html?_r=0&referer=

kind of justice; they clearly were venting feelings about *all* of the police shootings, not just this one. But they were chanting this: “No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace.” They were saying that there would only be peace when what they feel like is justice takes place.

I think I understand their angst, but I don’t understand their rallying cry. In fact, I completely disagree with it. Justice won’t bring peace. If anything, “justice” only brings anger and revenge from those who don’t like the justice that was served. Christ came to bring peace, so where is the “justice” in the God of all Love, the God of the universe, being brutally tortured and nailed to a wooden cross by the creatures that he created and loves? Where is the justice in the God of love being murdered? And yet in his very death, *Love* rose from the dead and brought true peace into this world. Justice doesn’t bring peace; *Love* does. War doesn’t bring peace; *Love* does. Justice and war only bring temporary cessation of war until the other side comes up with a bigger army or weapon. Only *Love* brings true peace.

So let me ask you first, on this second Sunday of Advent, do you have peace with God? Have you stopped fighting with God, stopped fighting with the world, and have you allowed love to bring peace to your life? Do you know in your heart the peace that God brings through Jesus Christ? Do you know God's call on your life to be a peacemaker? Respond now to God's invitation.

Pray