

How can we experience peace in a world that doesn't find peace necessary? It's an ancient question. Some people thought that in the 20th century we would figure out how to wage peace. Enormous optimism about humanity and its future filled people as the 20th century began. Even Christians in the last century thought that people were getting kinder and better.

But we all know the 20th century turned out to be the bloodiest in history. It basically began with the genocide of the Armenians. It included two World Wars, one of them the “war to end all wars.” The 20th century perhaps reached its lowest point with the mass murder of as many as six million Jews. Peace was also in short supply among the ancient Israelites of whom our Scripture speaks. Isaiah shows that their nation and their capital Jerusalem (which by the way means *City of Peace*), are in deep trouble. The Israelites are morally bankrupt, spiritually rebellious, and religiously guilty. Their capital is full of “murderers.” Israel's leaders are horribly corrupt. Sound familiar?

The land of Israel lies in tattered ruins. Foreigners plundered her fields so that the land of “milk and honey” is covered with little but rocks and scrub brush. Israel's cities are shabby wastelands that foreign powers have thoroughly looted. God calls the Israelites, “survivors,” a mere shell of their former glory. Large armies have shrunk Israel to nothing more than a fortress under attack whose citizens have a siege mentality. Into this depressing context God speaks a potentially even more depressing word of judgment through the prophet Isaiah. The Lord condemns the countless Israelite acts of religion as a burden of which God has grown tired. God even threatens to close his eyes and shut his ears to Israel's prayers. God also warns that resistance to repentance and obedience will result in Israel's annihilation.

In stark contrast, many of the countries in the world today enjoy relative peace. However, all of us long for a word of hope, a word of lasting peace. Places exist today that hope for peace, as well as places where threats to peace exist. Of course, U.S. Christians don't have to look overseas to find examples of violence. The streets of our communities are filled with large and small acts of random violence. Violence in some of our schools threaten our children.

In fact, we don't have to look beyond our own homes and our neighborhoods to find violence that makes us long for peace. Many families don't know any more peace than Adam and Eve's family did. For instance, how many of us in some ways dread the upcoming holidays because of the tension it will produce? Sometimes we blithely let conflict plague us. You and I let hostility scar our congregations and denominations, our friends and families, our homes and hearts. We sometimes cultivate or contribute to some of these tensions that haunt our

personal relationships. As a result, the disappointments, the doubt and despair that mars our world entangles Christian people too.

However, God insists that he refuses to desert us. God hasn't abandoned even sinful people who choose to make swords and spears. God hasn't abandoned people who still aim nuclear missiles at each other. God hasn't even abandoned people who let vines grow tangled and ground to lie fallow because we prefer making swords over plowshares and spears over pruning hooks. God won't even abandon us to our own limited understanding of reality and vision for the future. Besides, God gives us a vision of a world that is radically different than the one we contentious human beings have produced. Yet we still "*train for war*," in the words of verse 4, so that some of our finest young adults must spend the holidays in distant places to risk their lives in defense of our country.

Jesus Christ defeated Satan, his allies, the principalities, and the powers through his cross and empty tomb. That means you and I no longer have to run and hide from God like Adam and Eve did. In Christ God has graciously given us peace with himself. God has made us his sons and daughters who by God's grace can begin to know peace with our Christian brothers and sisters. Christ intends that his church will be a place where, like a lonely candle, the light of peace shines to lighten the darkness that surrounds us. So, you and I start to experience peace right now when we receive God's message of peace and pass that message on to one another. We also work to reconcile ourselves to each other so that we can come with joy and peace to celebrate this season together.

Here in our church we intend to proclaim the Gospel message of alternatives to a way of bitterness and violence. What good is a promise, that remains largely unkept? What good is it to talk about peace in a world where nations still turn their iron into swords and their steel into spears? What good is it to talk about peace in church when tensions sometimes scar and destroy our sweet fellowship? What good is talk about peace when so many of our communities and neighborhoods are pockmarked with bitterness and violence?

It's only good because God's Word reminds us of the alternatives to the course of war and violence that the world has chosen—and we still choose. It's good because while we remain stubbornly unimaginative in our pursuit of peace, God's promises are able to stretch our imaginations. God doesn't lift up the sword of judgment or the spear of punishment toward those who hear and believe God's promise of peace. Instead, God challenges and equips us to pursue peace even now. It reminds me of the faith-based cartoon *Pontius Puddle* in which I once saw two "religious" frogs sitting on a riverbank talking to each other. The first says to his friend, "I've often wanted to ask God why he doesn't do something to stop people from

dying of hunger and from the effects of war.” Then his frog friend asks, “Why don’t you?” The first frog replies, “Because I’m scared God will ask me the same question.”

It’s time, says Paul, for us to wake up from our sinful slumber. It’s time for you and me, in the words of Romans 13:12, to “*put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.*” It’s time for God’s people to put aside our attitudes and actions that make for hatred instead of love; war instead of peace. After all, we Christians believe that Christ’s return will usher in the complete peace for which we long. Do we want the Lord to find us working *against* the peace that he brought at his birth and will bring when he returns? Well then, how do we work for peace in the meantime?

Psalm 122 challenges God’s people to “*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.*” But it doesn’t stop there. As we pray, says the Psalm writer, “*May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of [your] family and friends, I will say peace be within you.*” In anticipation of the peaceful day of which Isaiah speaks, Christians pray for the peace of the city over which Jesus wept. We pray that all the people of Jerusalem will know the wholeness and healing that comes from a faithful realization of God’s presence among us.

Many people cynically assume that no one will ever solve the problems of the Middle East. Yet, considering God’s promises of peace, we can’t give up. Instead, we continue to pray for just and equitable solutions to the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis. We also pray for peace in places like Ukraine where peace seems like an endangered species. You and I pray for peace in places like our schools and our streets. Christians pray for peace in our families, our workplaces, and our worshiping communities. For we believe that someday God will usher in a complete reign of peace in the new heaven and the new earth. In preparation for that day we are also to live peaceable lives. In the language of Romans 13, we shed the soiled “clothing” of spiritual darkness. You and I are not to act in ways that are consistent with spiritual darkness. We behave, in Paul’s words, “*decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*” Most Christians exercise self-control over alcohol, sexuality, and social relationships.

We do that in anticipation of the peace that Christ’s return will usher in. You and I “dress” in such a way as to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. With the protective power of the Holy Spirit, we arm ourselves against potentially harmful attacks of Satan. You and I must act with love and compassion and peace every day. We must love our enemies every

day. Christian folks are compassionate toward neighbors and co-workers every day. We do everything we possibly can to live in peace with our families and our friends. Don't we?

Yet we approach the end of 2022 in a world that is not only broken and hostile, but also at war in many places. But we also live in a world that belongs to God who keeps his promises, no matter what. In his intriguing book, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin and Sadat at Camp David*, Lawrence Write describes what led to what is sometimes called the "1973 Yom Kippur War." At the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel held the entire Sinai peninsula with the exception of Port Fouad. "The Bar-Lev line was a chain of fortifications built by Israel along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal after taking the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. It was believed to be one of the greatest defensive fortifications in military history. It was considered impenetrable by most Israelis until it was overrun in 1973 by the Egyptian military during Operation Badr.

In 1973 Moshe Dayan—then Israeli minister of defense—took an American diplomat, Nicholas Veliotis, on a tour of the fortifications. As usual, the Egyptian soldiers were playing soccer, fishing and swimming in the Suez canal. Veliotis asked what would happen if Egyptian forces attacked the Israelis without warning. "The Egyptian Army today is like a ship covered with rust while anchored in harbor and unable to move!" Dayan said dismissively. He was echoing the views of the Israeli defense establishment: *Peace no longer seemed necessary or even desirable*. What will the 21st century hold? The philosophy of Moshe Dayan may define this century too: "*Peace is not necessary.*"

But I'm convinced that Isaiah's vision on this 1st Sunday of Advent is not to proclaim doom, but to see hope—to see possibilities, even when no one else can see them. We are called not to lose hope, but to walk in the light of the Lord; to move toward the kind of world God has in store; to work for what makes for peace—even while we work to repair a world that is broken.

We do not come here to practice an empty ritual that makes no earthly difference. We come to the house of the Lord to learn that peace is what God has promised.

And yes, it's absolutely necessary. Amen.