

We all experience the same thing. There are times we try to relax, fall asleep, or simply find peace of mind. And no matter what we do, there is no peace. How often is it like that for you? What is it like when you want to find peace and struggle with conflict that won't cease?

Several years ago, I was trying to write a sermon about peace and the harder I tried, the more elusive any thoughts became. I moved from the quiet of our forest setting, into the sanctuary filled with the colors of the stained-glass window, and back to a comfortable chair in my office. But I couldn't settle down. I got into my car, drove to parking lot hidden from traffic and turned off my phone. Without distractions, my anxiety, the noise and motion of the normal movements of life, I finally felt a small dose of what God pours out abundantly in the gift of peace.

Finally, Isaiah's words we just read spoke more clearly to me. I could feel the power of his promise that the gift of peace (lost since the beginning of time) would indeed return. Isaiah promised all that is torn apart by the conflict of sin will be healed and restored to a perfect peace. And once that happens, there will be true peace. (Doesn't that sound great?)

Preparing for the gift of Christ is different than getting ready for Christmas. Remember the angel-song of a holy night in Bethlehem? The joyous music to ears of shepherds was about peace on earth! After Easter, Jesus promised the gift of peace! Our Advent preparations should really be focused on the elusive peace which the world finds so elusive.

But we are so busy getting ready, that often the traditions and energy of the season become more important than Christ, and the busy intensity works against the quiet peace Jesus' birth promises to bring. Advent is a gifted reminder of what we are waiting for. By narrowing our focus to the centuries long anticipation of a Messiah can better prepare our hearts to receive and are rejoice in the gift of God's peace!

How often have Israelis and Palestinians said, "Let's talk peace," yet violence is all that seems to result? The Korean War has continued since 1949! There is no fighting but there is also no peace. Politics is defined by opposing groups who constantly demand for the other side to offer peace but refuse to do so themselves! Peace is a meaningless gift if it does not begin with surrender and a willingness to be at peace.

Why is it that something we all crave, the simplicity of peace, is often the most elusive gift of all? Maybe the problem isn't that peace is elusive but that we are just not ready to surrender to its quiet assurance.

Too often we hang onto conflict rather than surrender to peace. As we continue to carry anger for what someone has done, or resentment for how someone has failed us, do you see how that disturbs the peace? To put another way, if I am not at peace, how can I live with peace? Part of preparing my heart is to open my hands and let go. When depressed, agitate, angry, or afraid the gift of peace remains unopened. It is wasted just as a love that is rejected or a letter returned to sender.

There was a young man who was wildly in love with the girl down the street. He talked to her. He sat next to her on the bus. He dreamed about her. He hoped they could live happily every after. One day he built up courage and sent her a note, asking if she would be his girlfriend. She knew his shyness and how difficult it was for him to write even a note. Taking his cue, she replied in a note and had a friend deliver it right away, to joyfully end his wait.

The man was excited. Here was his answer, from the young lady who meant so much. But he was afraid to open it – what if she said "no!" (Of course, she could have just as easily said "yes," but the man was so afraid of what might come, he did nothing.) Her answer was available, but he chose not to participate. And so, what could have been, never was. He continued to live in conflict rather than peace.

Our preparations for Christmas can teach of our preparations for peace. As a manger was ready to receive a baby, so our hearts can be open to receive that gift in a personal way. It is about being open to a change in heart and a willingness to allow that baby to become my life.

It has been over 40 years since the death of John Lennon. In his song, "Imagine" he longed for a world without religion, heaven, countries, or war. He thought that would bring peace, and if everyone joined as one, such a world could be. The reality is, imagining won't change the world. Sin is that strong and Satan is that active. True peace comes only with the victory of Jesus and the surrender of my heart to the peace he has already made for me.

How wonderful if marriages would last and countries could resolve conflicts. If terrorists would accept love and victims could forgive. If children could have any friend they wanted, and adults could learn to listen rather than shout? How incredible if we could face the darkness of the tomb, and be filled with peace. Because we find it so difficult to imagine, we are already doomed to fail.

It is said a leopard can't change its spots, and in order for there to be any victory, there must always be a vanquished foe. A lion is a lion and a lamb is a lamb, and if the two meet, only one will be satisfied with the outcome. But Isaiah said this will change. A day will come when the leopard's spots will change, lions and lambs will live in peace, and the conflict of sin will be replaced by the greatest gift of all—perfect peace!

On a quiet night in a sleepy town a manger received the gift of perfect peace. On a quiet morning in a graveyard near Calvary the world received the peace beyond what the world can ever achieve. Most important in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is that perfect peace has finally shown its lovely face.

And that peace is the gift which we open not only on Christmas but in every moment that we allow Christ rather than a broken world to be the heartbeat of our living. As we surrender in the silence of prayer, there is peace. As we taste the bread and wine, there is peace. As God's love becomes more real than our disappointments, fears, or the noise of a broken world, there is peace. Isaiah's advent imagery reminds us what we are waiting for, and that will change how we wait.

Peace comes when I surrender my control, fears, and familiar routine and open my heart for the gift that Christ has already brought to me. That can come in prayer. It can come in silence. It can come on retreat. But it comes when I let go and see that Christ has already changed my leopard spots and helped me to safely relax even when surrounded by lions.

This is what we are preparing for. More than personal traditions of Christmas, we are opening our hearts for the gift of perfect peace. The long lost in Eden. The harmony of creation. The music of the spheres. Heaven on earth – the gift of peace. Our hearts are prepared by what God would do in a manger, on a cross, and in emptying the tomb of lasting death.

We prepare by remembering a baby in a manger. We remember there is nothing more peaceful than holding a baby, until that baby reaches out and holds us in return. And the only way to receive that gift is to give up the habits of wolves, ignore the noise of lions, and allow the peace a helpless infant brings to fill our hearts is to let go of what disturbs peace and open our hearts to God's perfect gift of peace.