

A New Normal?
Mathew 10:16-39

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old
From angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold
Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, from heaven's all gracious king
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

Peace on earth, goodwill to men from heavens all gracious King. Edmund King, the author of the Christmas carol entitled It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, is not the only one with that desire. The writer of that beloved carol was inspired by these words found in Luke's Gospel, 2:14. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those with whom He is pleased. The heavenly host, a multitude of angels, boldly proclaimed that peace was born into a world that was at war with God. Today, some would have us believe that they were wrong, for it does seem that the earth groans ever louder for that illusive peace. Perhaps now more than ever, in many parts of the world, peace and goodwill are overshadowed by religious persecution, hatred, bigotry, bloodshed, thievery, and the wanton disregard for the personal property of others.

If you are wondering if we can ever sing that beloved carol again in good conscience, this message is for you! Did Jesus bring peace into the world or did He not? It is a fair question. If He did, why does such strife and turmoil remain? Logic and reason would have our human minds conclude that a, the angels were wrong, b, the hymnwriter was wrong, c, the Scriptures are wrong, or d, they are all wrong. Is the correct answer a, b, c, or d?

B might be the most logical choice, for even the most gifted of human minds remain fallible and prone to error. Though the words of the carol are beautiful, with all due respect to Edmund King they do not convey the same message as the inspired Scripture passage that was behind it. Even so, we should give him the benefit of the doubt and say the best answer is actually e, none of the above. The truth lies elsewhere. Where do we go to find it?

The answer may be found in the Scripture passages we heard earlier. Both are part of the lectionary readings for this Sunday. As different as they are, they dovetail nicely with the reading from Romans we looked at last week where we found that Jesus' work on the cross is proof positive that God loves us. **By dying for our sins, Jesus offers us peace with God.** We need not fear judgment or the deadly consequences of sin. So why does Jesus seem to be saying something quite different in this chapter of Mathews Gospel? *Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

Before we go there, we will need to quickly look at the passage from Genesis. There we see the account of how God rescued the son of Abraham and Hagar from dying in the desert. Abraham is considered the father of Judaism, Islam and Christian faiths. Hagar was one of his slaves, and because his wife Sarah was unable to have children, Abraham did what was customary at the time and had a child with her. The child was named Ishmael. Later, at an incredibly old age Sarah was able to conceive and she gave birth to a child whom they named Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael were half-brothers, and there was intense jealousy between them. Both would go on to form great nations of faith. From Isaac, it was the Israelites from which Judaism and Christianity would eventually come, and from Ishmael came the Arabs and a man named Mohammed, the foundation of the Muslim faith. Both families share common ancestry, extreme hatred for each other and do not consider Jesus to be the Son of God, the Messiah.

Yet He heard Ishmael's cries and saved him from dying in the desert. It may seem like the opposite of bringing peace into the world, but God had told Hagar very early on that her son would go on to form a great nation and God does not go back on His word, no matter the circumstances. It is also a picture of grace- another one of those times where God allows the so-called bad guy to live and have an opportunity to repent. It also paints a picture of something much less comfortable for our modern- day minds to accept: separation. Holiness would demand there be a separation between the two families. Though both were blessed by God, His covenant was only with Isaac.

With that thought in mind, the words of Jesus in the 10th chapter of Mathews Gospel take on new meaning. When Jesus said “do not think I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” Jesus was reminding His disciples that the truth of the Scriptures is like a sword, even sharper than any two edged sword, and it’s primary role is to help us discern and separate the holy from the unholy. When that happens, there will be persecution, conflict, and unrest along the way. These things are nothing new, for they have been plaguing God’s people since the fall of humanity. We should not be surprised but expect them to happen. Jesus was hated for His teaching, and because we are His followers some, perhaps even many will hate us too. Contrary to the teaching of some false teachers, our determination to live the Christian life will often bring conflict rather than wealth and prosperity.

So have no fear of those who hate us or ridicule us for our beliefs. They may have power to kill our body, but they cannot kill our soul. It matters not whether it is a person, an angry mob, or a virus, we need not fear them, for **our soul is safe if we have placed our faith and trust in Jesus.** As we saw last week, He loves us like nobody else does or can. God is the great provider, and the analogy is that He loves us so much that He knows every intimate detail about us, including the exact numbers of hairs on our head. It means He also knows our every need, whether it is a life-saving drink of water in the desert or affirmation that we are loved. When you consider the billions of people alive today, that is an amazing thing. When we love Him more than we love ourselves, our families, our homes, our yards, our possessions, our lifestyle, and everything else that drives us or makes us happy, we will have the lasting peace of Christ that the angels sang about the night Jesus was born. And even if we have not put Jesus first, we still should not fear the things that can harm us. Jesus tells us our fear should be for the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell, a place where peace will never be found. That verse is a sword that will quickly separate the holy from the unholy.

During this season of turmoil and unrest, the evil one will tempt us to abandon the unholy and leave them to wallow in their sin. That is a dangerous thing, especially since each of us may have a different understanding of who the unholy might be. Let each of us remember that Jesus is the One wielding the sword, not us. If you are like me, you have heard and seen so much sin in the past weeks we can only wonder how long God will allow it to continue. To use a tired saying it has become a new normal. To make matters worse, the Christian response to it has been overwhelmingly less than Christian.

The Biblical rocks of love, grace and mercy have been set aside and replaced with self-righteous stones that are forcefully cast in all directions. In the end, all suffer loss except for the evil one. It is reasonable to conclude that the only thing that brought him more joy was watching Jesus die on the cross. The mission of the church is not to cast stones and fix blame, but to promote the foundational truth that without holiness, no one will see the Lord. **Without holiness, there will be no peace.** If we are at peace with God, we will not throw stones or rest until our persecutors, whoever they might be, find peace with Him also.

We often tend to think of peace as the absence of war and rioting, but the peace that Jesus promises is a much different kind of peace. **Jesus did not come to bring peace to the world, but to bring peace between God and His people.** It is the peace that comes from knowing that all is well between us and God and it brings joy to our heart. Elsewhere in the Scripture Paul refers to it as the peace that surpasses all understanding. The words of the hymnwriter remind us that the violence and bloodshed will end, but not until the end of the age.

For lo the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old
When with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold
When the new heaven and earth shall own the prince of peace their King,
and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.