

Isaiah 2:1-4 (NRSV)

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7 (NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Sleep in Peace

Imagine the scene in your minds with me: It was the winter of 1818 in Obendorf, a village near Salzburg, Austria. Joseph Mohr was the assistant pastor at St. Nicholas' Church, and the pastors and congregation had a dilemma! It was just a few days before Christmas, and the church organ was broken. It would be weeks or months before anyone could come to attempt repairs on the organ. Their spirits sank as they realized they would not have their beloved organ to provide music for the Christmas services.

The Spirit-led creative solution to this dilemma resulted in one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time! One legend states that two years earlier, Joseph Mohr had attended a dramatic presentation of the Christmas story while visiting his father's home. After the play, Joseph walked home beneath a starry sky, and was inspired to write a poem to share the Christmas story in simple terms. Mohr gave that simple poem to St. Nicholas' organist, Franz Gruber, who composed a simple melody which could be easily taught to the congregation.

On Christmas Eve, 1818, at the midnight service, Gruber accompanied the singing of "Silent Night, Holy Night" on his guitar. Many theories exist concerning the popularization of this carol. Regardless of how its popularity spread, the singing of "Silent Night" became one of the most common ways for Christians world-wide to offer hushed and hallowed praise at the birth of the Christ Child year after year.

So universal is the timeless melody that it caused a day of cease-fire in the midst of World War I. The officers on all sides had ordered the troops to continue the fight...even on Christmas. But in the dark of Christmas eve, German soldiers in the trenches of the front line began singing "Silent Night ... Stille Nacht" The British soldiers recognized the melody, and joined in singing. The guns and artillery fell silent in over 500 skirmish points along the front as unarmed soldiers came out of the trenches, exchanged Christmas greetings, and joined in singing carols together.

This sacred song, beloved in so many lands and cultures, transcends barriers that at other times divide and polarize the human family. In the silencing of war, if only for a day, we can hear the cries of the suffering of humanity and ask, "Is this the way out of the dark night?" Surely the Prince of Peace can transform lives once divided and bitter and warring, into lives of faithful peace, joy, love, hope, and light.

Someone asked me this week why we are hearing a Christmas scripture text already when it is only the first Sunday of December. And while our text from Isaiah sounds like a Christmas text because Jesus came to fulfill its prophecy, it is just that, a prophecy, delivered to God's people over 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The story, in a nutshell, is that the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, once strong and mighty, had been taken into captivity during the end of the kingdom of Israel. They were then pawns of other powerful states, and the people were oppressed, vulnerable, and in anguish. It was a dark time for these conquered people, as they struggled to endure brutality, poverty, and hunger. Their safety and security had been stripped away; children had been taken from families and forced into slavery, crops were handed over to the powerful and greedy conquerors. There was no hope other than to pray that God would send light into their time of darkness.

It was to these desperate people that God sent the prophecy by way of Isaiah. *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light ... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders...”* Among the Israelites, aspects of royal ideology reflected Egyptian coronation practices in which the king was given four names. So the names ascribed to this Promised One signified the hopes of the people, the relationship with God, and the ability of the Child to bring eternal peace. *“He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

This text once again puts God at the center stage as the one, and only one, who can bring the people from darkness to light, from oppression to freedom, from subjugation to peace. I would think that after hearing such a prophecy, people slept with greater peace than what they had known before. The holy infant, arriving centuries later, was born into a similarly violent, oppressive, broken society, desperately in need of a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting One, Prince of Peace!

Consider for a moment, how today, our communities, families, churches, and world are increasingly torn and divided over many issues of cultural contention. Families fight, politicians argue and leverage power, hatred is spewed on the internet, there is violence in homes and neighborhoods, and starvation of whole communities. Sometimes we justifiably feel that peace, joy, love, hope, and light are in short supply. Perhaps this Christmas could be a time of ceasefire from our own sources of conflict. Perhaps this year, we will raise our voices in song to celebrate the birth of Christ with spirits of peace and love that transcends all barriers. When the rancor is silenced, *we will* hear the voices of those in need of economic, social, and political justice. And with the light of the Christ shining ever more brightly in our midst, we will be equipped to reach across barriers to offer words of hope and peace, that we may all sing together and sleep in heavenly peace.

So here is your assignment:

1. Intentionally engage in conversation with a person with whom you have obvious disagreements. Listen. Speak caringly, choosing your words most intentionally.
2. Seek to discover common ground (i.e.: love for children, fondness of animals, concern for the elderly, anxiety over the societal trends, ...).
3. Focus on the commonalities, and on hope for all persons to live in peace.
4. May that relationship be transformed.

It is for us that God sent Christ to offer heavenly peace! May we allow Christ to use us to make the world Calm and Bright this year!