

Advent 2017: Peace - Ephesians 2:11-22

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[0 : 00] Nathan, I remember now. Fourteen children, sixteen altogether.! Ephesians 2, verse 11.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

By abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.

[1 : 50] So making peace. And might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

In whom the whole structure being built or joined together grows in a holy temple or into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Father, we thank you for your word. That it is the revelation of you. That it is our souls meet.

[3 : 01] That it is light for our lives. We ask God that by your Spirit you would illumine us today. And enable us to gain from your word that we might live more faithfully to you.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Today's Advent focus is on peace. Peace is a significant part of the gospel. And it is not surprising then that it is a major part of the Christmas story. In fact, it was the only benefit mentioned by that great angelic host when they announced to the shepherds, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

That being so, it is surprising that we do not hear more about peace. I try to think back of all the sermons I heard about peace.

I can't remember that many. Maybe once or twice during Christmas. For the most part, our understanding of words, specifically peace, comes from our culture.

[4 : 22] When I was young, I heard a lot about peace. It was during the Vietnam War and the peace movement that surrounded that, that I was a young teenager.

And to my mind at that time, peace was cool. We had our own peace sign, you know, and then the circle with the upside down cross.

We had our own peace songs, peace train, imagine. And for me, peace was simply an end to the war.

Later on, when my family and I lived in Israel, peace took on a different concept. It was primarily associated with a process to bring some kind of coexistence, compromised coexistence between the Arabs and Israel.

And today, when I hear the word peace, it's usually in reference to a state of mind, tranquility, a calmness. I asked my children this week what they think when they hear the word peace.

[5 : 41] And most of them had the same answer. One of them even reminded me of an illustration I used in a sermon once, called Depicting a Dove Sound Asleep in the Midst of a Storm.

Peace is one of those words that has a wide range of meaning. It can refer to the absence of war, treaty between countries, civil order, and tranquility.

And if you look through the scriptures, you'll see that the Bible uses the term in all those various ways as well. But I'd like us to focus this morning on one aspect, the one that's mentioned here in Ephesians chapter 2.

And I think this passage is significant because it's perhaps the only place in scripture where peace is developed in this gospel sense the way it is.

When this passage of scripture regarding peace is understood, I think it sets a foundation for the rest of those aspects of peace.

[6 : 56] And so this really is a foundational passage when wanting to understand Christmas peace. And I think it's God's will for us to experience this peace in a greater way.

I'd like to suggest this morning that these verses in Ephesians reveal the true peace of Christmas. It's not a typical Christmas passage, but it is a gospel passage.

It's the shalom of the Old Testament. It's the wholesome unity between people and with God that's provided by the sacrifice of Christ.

I believe one of the main reasons we have this passage here in Ephesians is because God wants us to more fully appreciate peace. And to make every effort to maintain that peace, to keep that peace in the church, in our relationships with one another.

Now, the concept of peace is the focus specifically of verses 13 through 18. But to better understand what the apostle says about it, we need to consider the context before and after those verses.

[8 : 17] And that's why I've read from verses 11 to 22 this morning. Each of those sections has something to contribute to this idea of the peace of Christmas.

And so first, we'll look at verses 11 and 12 again. And from these verses, I'd like to suggest that in order to appreciate and maintain the peace of Christmas, you must remind yourself of why you needed it.

Look at verses 11 again. Begin with verse 11. It begins, Therefore remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Now, this verse 11 contains really what is the first directive in this amazing letter.

[9 : 34] It's the first directive. And all it's asking us to do here is remember something. It's a challenge to remind yourself of your life before you believed in Christ.

Now, that challenge follows an important theme that begins in chapter 1, and I'd like to just give a brief survey or summary of what we find there.

Paul introduces the letter in chapter 1 by giving praise to God for everything that's involved in His including us in His great plan, His plan to bring unity to all of His creation.

That's verses 3 through 14 in chapter 1. The apostle calls it in verse 10, God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, in heaven and on earth.

Then in verse 15, he begins to pray for his readers that God would enable them to gain a better understanding of God and His plan and God's ability to carry out that plan.

[10 : 54] Specifically, he wants believers in Jesus to understand their hope, verses 17 and 18, to understand the importance God places on their or our part in His plan, verse 18, and then to understand the significance of the power that He provides on our behalf, in verse 19.

And beginning with verse 20, all the way through verse 10 of the next chapter, we have an elaboration of that prayer and of that power.

It's the same power that raised Christ from the dead and lifted Him to the supreme position over all authority in heaven and on earth. And it's the same power that raised you and I from the dead, spiritual death.

In chapter 2, verses 1 through 3, freeing us from the servitude of the devil and the world and our own fleshly passions.

And He did all of that by grace. By grace alone bringing about this powerful deliverance.

[12 : 12] Now that's the brief introduction to the next section then, verses 11 through 22. And here then, He begins by inviting His Gentile readers to remember something significant about their

relationship to God's plan.

And that is, at one time, they were excluded from it. Now He describes this exclusion in very careful, systematic, evocative language.

He says that they were derogatorily called the uncircumcision by those who were the circumcision. That was not a friendly term that was used about the Gentiles.

He says they were separated. He calls them alienated and strangers in these terms specifically in reference to the Messiah and the community of Israel and the covenants that God had promised to them.

And then more generally they were therefore because they were excluded from God's people they were hopeless. and godless in the world.

[13 : 36] Now that was a big deal for the Apostle Paul. There was no greater distinction between the Jew and the Gentile. The Gentiles might have tolerated been tolerated by the Jewish people but the distinction was clearly maintained.

To the religious Jew the Gentile was a dog. And there was a wall of partition in the temple courtyard that kept the Gentiles out of the more holy areas with a dire warning that if they would cross they would cross at the expense of their life.

Hostility was always under the surface and there was such a strong division that when the Gentiles first received the gospel it became a major controversy in the church.

How can they be a part of the church? They must be circumcised or can they even be a part of the church?

But to the Gentile there was a huge gap as well because they experienced a growing hatred because of what they considered this Jewish arrogance that they were the people of God.

[15 : 06] And that hostility has continued to this day with many still alive who witnessed the most greatest act of genocide in all of human history.

but the scriptures instruction to remember doesn't seem that relevant to us today.

It's been almost 2,000 years since Paul wrote this passage and gave this directive to remember and a lot has changed. We haven't really experienced this animosity between Jews and Gentiles.

We don't really know it that well. In fact, we even live in a culture where tolerance is heralded as a good thing.

But we should still try to see ourselves in that situation because I think it's important for appreciating the change that took place.

[16 : 09] From the time of Abraham to the time of Christ, almost exclusively God's plan focused on the Jewish people, on the people of Israel. And those during that entire period who died outside the Jewish community and faith died lost.

Their exclusion was our exclusion. Outside of Christ, outside of God. Christ, now the peace of Christmas was needed because we were all outsiders.

We were hopeless. We were objects of God's wrath. And I think knowing this is essential to anticipating or appreciating and holding on to the peace of Christmas.

Christmas. Now the second part of the passage, the heart of this passage this morning is verses 13 through 18. That section is really the core of Paul's message here.

And as such, I believe it encourages us that in order to appreciate and maintain the peace of Christmas, you must embrace the central role of Christ in that peace.

[17 : 39] In order to maintain, to appreciate the peace of Christmas, you must embrace the central role of Christ in that peace. Verse 13 begins with a wonderful contrast.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. See, Christ changes everything, doesn't he?

but it's not just his birth, his life, that makes the change. It's by the blood of Christ, we're told, that we are brought near.

Once we were separated, alienated, outside, hopeless, godless, but now in Christ, and specifically because of his death, we are included.

you like to belong, to feel that you belong. Wouldn't it be a lonely life, just being outside?

[18 : 49] Well, this is belonging to the ultimate degree. This is what God has provided in Christ. Each one of us can be included.

God has wanted to included. Now, there are many ways that we benefit from Christ's life, from his death and resurrection, but the benefit that's emphasized in this passage here is peace.

And it makes it clear that there's a connection between our being included and peace. First ten verses of chapter two focus on an individual aspect of salvation.

And perhaps this is why it's one of the most popular passages of Ephesians, most well-known anyway. But here in verses 11 through 22, there's a shift, specifically verses 13 through 18. There's a shift. And the shift is one of relationship. See, in the past, Gentiles were separated, not only from God, but from the people of God.

[20 : 03] And what then does salvation do for that relationship? It changes the relationship. It brings a change, not only in our relationship to God, but in our relationship to others.

And that's why I believe we find this focus here on peace. And it's such a significant distinction that the apostle develops this idea through the next five verses.

The idea of being brought near is equated with peace. And that peace is inseparably linked to Jesus. And so what I'd like to do is take a couple moments and highlight three ways in those verses that peace is linked to Jesus.

First of all, he's introduced with the sentence, he himself is our peace. That's verse 14. For he himself is our peace.

Now that's a significant designation. And what I believe it does is it describes for us the way in which peace is accomplished.

[21 : 21] The only way in which peace is accomplished. It's the prince of peace himself that made peace possible. Now there's two phrases that I'd just like to draw to your attention in verses 14 and 15.

In verse 14 it says, in his flesh. Now that's an obvious reference to the death of Christ.

It was the death of Christ that made real peace possible. The other phrase is in verse 15. It says, in himself. The unity that is being described here in this verse occurs where?

In a location that is in Christ. That's where it takes place. It's not some general external peace. It's one that's only possible to those who have been by faith united with him.

And this way, by Christ's work and in union with him, peace is possible. I think it's interesting that typically the Christian message about peace is some general peace.

[22 : 40] peace to all of you. It's a peaceful season. God wants the world to experience and enjoy peace. As a boy, we used to watch, we're a good Catholic family, we watched the Ten Commandments every year and went to church on Christmas and Easter.

But before we went to church on Easter, we watched the Ten Commandments because it came out every year. And I remember after coming to faith in Christ that we watched the Ten

Commandments again and I was shocked because at the end, you know, Charlton Heston, I mean, Moses stands up there and he says, go into the land and proclaim liberty to all its inhabitants.

I thought, wait a minute, that's not what happened. He didn't tell them to go in and proclaim liberty. He said, you're going to go slaughter everybody.

That was a big change for me. I think the same thing is true about peace in this season. You know, we typically herald peace as this general experience that God wants the world to experience.

It's not like that peace. Because peace can only happen in Christ. The message is peace is only to those who are in Christ.

[24 : 16] And that's why he himself is our peace. The second way peace is linked to Jesus is found at the end of verse 15 where it says that it says so making peace.

peace. Now, what's being described here is the result of Jesus' peacemaking. By dying on the cross, Jesus destroyed the very thing that kept Jews and Gentiles separated.

He calls it a wall of hostility, the law of commandments. It's most likely he had in mind those specific ceremonial and religious aspects of the law.

At the very least, the sacrifices, circumcision itself, but even the code itself that sentenced one to death for breaking the law.

Jesus' death brought an end to those ordinances that kept the Jew and the Gentile separated. And as a result, he made a new entity.

[25 : 29] We call it the church. that consists of every tribe and every language and every people and every nation. But that peace extends beyond human unity.

Ultimately, according to this verse, it relates to our relationship with God. And the picture we get here then is a peace that is collective.

it's not just my peace and your peace, although that's one of those aspects that is true. Let the peace of Christ guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

There is a sense in which peace is individual, but that's not the point of this passage. This passage is talking about something greater, a greater plan in which God relates to his people in terms of a unity.

Jews and Gentiles together, one entity, one man approaching him as one and united with him in that approach.

[26 : 45] This is the collective reconciliation that I believe the passage is encouraging us to understand. The third way that peace is connected to Jesus is found in verse 17.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. And so here we're told that Jesus also preaches peace.

He not only is peace, he not only makes peace, but he preaches peace to the far and to the near. The added element is this proclamation that Christ himself makes.

Now this is an allusion to a passage in Isaiah, Isaiah 57, 19, where God himself says peace, peace, to the far and to the near.

Paul uses it in reference to Christ himself and the Jew and Gentile. And what that proclamation is, is simply the gospel.

[27 : 56] This is the invitation, the message and invitation that every one of us have received. It invites us to reconciliation, reconciliation with God.

It invites us to peace, peace with others. And it invites us to free unhindered access to God and therefore to benefit from all that he is on our behalf.

There is a way in which Jew and Gentile together, in which every tongue and tribe and nation together, in which you and I together have access to God.

This is the peace of Christmas. There's no true lasting peace apart from the peace of Christmas. No peace process, no peace movement, no imagining, no drugs, no genetic engineering, no meditation can accomplish what Christ has accomplished to make peace.

[29 : 13] He himself has dealt once and for all with all the problems that hinder peace. And he has called us to experience that peace.

And finally, the last section of our passage provides one further aspect that I'd like to look at with regard to this peace of Christmas.

In verses 19 through 22, we are reminded of God's ultimate plan for peace. from this section we can glean that in order to appreciate and maintain the peace of Christmas, we must anticipate God's ultimate plan for the church.

In order to appreciate and maintain the peace of Christmas, you must anticipate God's ultimate plan for the church. in verse 19 of the section the previous contrast is summarized again.

He says, so then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

[30 : 29] In this passage, in this verse and following verses, the apostle Paul uses a variety of metaphors to describe something about God's plan for the church.

It involves a kingdom or a country and we are the citizens. It involves a household and we are the members. It involves a building.

There's a foundation, there's a cornerstone and then there's the structure itself. The apostles and prophets are the foundation, Christ himself is the cornerstone and we the united believers are the structure.

It's a holy temple. It's a dwelling place of God. Now how this amazing entity which is called New Jerusalem and Revelation how this will actually look I think is beyond our ability to grasp.

We just have these metaphors that we're familiar with so we can get a peek into what God's doing. Why he's called us together as a people.

[31 : 42] But there are some aspects that we can be sure about. It will be one that includes eternal peace.

It will be free from prejudice, from hostility, personal or interpersonal conflict or war. There will be no isolation, there will be no loneliness, there will be security and belonging, there will be perfect harmony and the joy of God's loving and everlasting presence.

And we will experience the full tranquility of a good, and I mean good life. that's what he's depicting here.

That's what he wants us to look forward to. And I think God gives us these peeks into his plan so that we'll have hope, so that we'll appreciate what he's done for us, and so that we'll have renewed strength to be able to maintain that hope in the midst of all the distractions.

Because I think it takes effort to maintain this hope in the world today. We face competing attractions every single day.

[33 : 09] But you have to just take a moment and ask yourself, what does the world really have to offer? What do we really have to look forward to if we believe what's being told to us?

peace. One of the gurus of my youth preached a peace that envisioned a unified world of brotherhood. He invited us to imagine a world without hell or heaven, without countries or religion or possessions.

He suggested that if we remove these externals, we can have peace and the world will be as one. But his popular message, in fact it's so popular, it was one of the most played songs of the last century.

That's what they say anyway. But his message was doomed to fail because it really doesn't address the problem inside us that makes peace impossible.

It doesn't. Just getting rid of the exteriors doesn't change who you and I are on the inside. It doesn't change the selfishness and the self-centeredness and the individual focus that we have.

[34 : 38] It doesn't change any of that. I know there's a few of you here that are kind of into Star Wars. what's this I hear about a marathon?

I was a brand new Christian when the first Star Wars came out and I was fascinated by the film and I even saw some parallels that really seemed to be encouraging.

the force was the Holy Spirit and Obi-Wan Kenobi's sacrifice was like Christ. He gave himself so Luke could live.

It was even called A New Hope. And even though I'm not sure there are some real die-hard followers of the philosophy as well as the graphics of the movies, it does present a perspective of peace.

But it's inadequate. It's perhaps more realistic than Lenin's world of peace. But it's still inadequate.

[36 : 05] Gradually I began to see that there really was no hope. The best that it could offer was a perpetual coexistence of good and evil.

The good and bad side of the force. It's just a part of what is. There's no changing that. The best it could provide for us perhaps was good keeping evil in check.

hope. Come on. What kind of hope is that? It has no solution to the evil that exists in the heart of humanity.

That's not real hope. And it can never produce real peace. Well, God wants us to appreciate more fully the peace that only he can supply.

he's not only given us a solution to the problem of sin and evil, he has the power to take care of these problems.

[37 : 16] The resurrection of Christ, the new birth, demonstrate that. And God will bring his plan into being, a united, eternal universe inhabited by those who are eternally and joyfully grateful.

for God's grace and continually awed by his greatness. This is the peace of Christmas. And Jesus invites you to this peace and to experience it more fully.

And so, in conclusion, let me remind you of what we've covered and make one, I believe, appropriate application. peace and peace.

I suggested at the beginning that this passage teaches that you can appreciate and maintain the peace of Christmas by, one, reminding yourself of why you needed it.

Two, by embracing the central role of Christ in providing it. And three, by anticipating the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan for peace.

[38 : 24] peace. That's the church. And I also mentioned that verse 11 of chapter 2 contains the first directive in the letter.

And it was simply a challenge to remember your life apart from Christ and to remember it in context of what God has done for you in Christ. That reminder, I believe, is encouraged in order to increase our appreciation of the peace that the gospel provides.

And it's interesting that there's only one other directive in the first three chapters. Now I'm trying to find a biblical application and I looked everywhere in the first three chapters and there's only that directive and there's only another one and that was only in the middle of chapter 3 where Paul tells

his readers not to be discouraged because he was in prison for their sake. that's all we find in three chapters of telling us what to do. But what is amazing is that chapter 4 which begins a very practical part of this book starts in verse 1 with a reference back to peace. there we read I therefore the prisoner of the Lord a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness with patience bearing with one another eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. [40 : 20] Not only does God want us to delight in and praise him for the peace that he's provided he wants us to do everything we can he wants us to utilize every gift we have to keep that unity a part of our daily lives of our life together as a people.

Do you have relationships where you experience conflict? Any of you? We all do. I challenge our peace and God is saying I believe to us this morning to value this peace that he gave his life to make maintain it.

Value it so much that you'll do anything to maintain it. That requires humility. It requires gentleness. It requires patience.

It requires bearing with one another in all of our weaknesses. Of all that the peace of Christmas provides at the heart of it is the unity of souls and the blissful reconciliation that we have with God and one another.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.