

By the Tender Mercy of Our God: Peace
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
December 5, 2021 Second Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Peace
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Luke 1:68-79

Welcome and Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday of Advent and Sunday of Peace.

Many of us love the peace we find in this church on a Sunday morning. I used to think it was largely the sanctuary, its beauty and the presence of the Spirit here, but then Covid happened. We were away for over a year and often anxious, and yet we felt tremendous comfort and reassurance to be together on Zoom week after week.

It turns out that simply being immersed in this welcoming and caring congregation can bring us real peace, whether we gather in person or online.

Just as it takes work to maintain a beautiful sanctuary, it takes conscious effort to maintain this loving community. Please do it again today by sharing your truth, your darkness and your light, and by extending your welcome and support to those around you, greeting especially those you do not know and those you know are struggling, so all may feel peace in this sacred and beloved place.

An Anglican priest wrote, “As darkness lengthens...we begin to see the signs of the season...Christmas music blasting everywhere, the heightened pace of holiday hustle and bustle...But inside many church buildings, this time of year looks different... There’s a slowing down, a silent stillness. The music turns to minor keys and becomes contemplative, even mournful... In this small space, Christmas season has not yet begun. The church waits in Advent. Christmas is a celebration...that light has come into darkness... But Advent bids us first to pause and to look, with complete honesty, at that darkness. To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right.”

What the writer does not say is that within that restlessness, that Advent ache of yearning for the light, sometimes we find a candle or a star, shining in the darkness. We find peace.

Lighting of the Advent Candle: Here is one of the great sayings about peace:

No peace in the world without peace in the nation.

No peace in the nation without peace in the town.

No peace in the town without peace in the home.

No peace in the home without peace in the heart.

That saying is from another religion, Taoism. People of all times and places have longed for peace in the heart and home and world. On this Sunday of Advent we celebrate that the way of Jesus Christ is a way that leads to peace. The way of Christ leads to peace in the heart by bringing us forgiveness and teaching us to trust and connecting us to God. The way of Christ leads to peace in the home and world by helping us be forgiving, compassionate and kind people, treating the earth with reverence and respect.

Long before Jesus, the people of Israel yearned for peace. The prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when God would send someone to lead the people there. Here is what he says:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”

Jesus Christ is known by many names. One of them is The Prince of Peace. He is also called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” And he is called the light of the world. We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ’s light into the world. With Christ’s advent comes peace, a peace we can find in our hearts and then share with the world. It is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome.

We do this giving thanks to God for the gift of peace. A saint once said, “Have peace in yourself and thousands will find salvation around you.” This Advent let us seek to have peace in our heart and resolve to work for peace in the world. There can be no peace without the things that make for peace, so let us seek to bring healing to the sick, food to the hungry, company to the lonely, restorative justice to the victims of violence, and well- being to all the creatures of the earth and the earth itself, so that they too may have peace. Prayer brings peace, so let us pray together the the New Version of the Lord’s Prayer:

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,
Way, Truth and Life,
Force of Love and Light
flowing within and all around us,
may your realm of compassion,
justice and peace rule our world.
Thank you for nurturing and guiding us,
forgiving us and helping us forgive,
and leading us away from harmful desires.
Please save us from all forms of evil,
for you are our source, our home, our power,
all goodness and beauty forever. Amen.

Sermon: *By the Tender Mercy of Our God: Peace*

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Imagine being able to believe that promise.

Imagine believing in a creative force or spirit moving through the universe, within and all around us.

Imagine being able to believe that this spirit some call God is characterized by tender mercy, by compassionate, infinite love working to bless the universe, and the blessing God’s tender mercy wants to give is light.

Imagine that you could believe that every death into darkness opens into a new birth of light, that even in the longest night of our hardest winter a dawn will break upon us and its higher power transform our lives.

Imagine believing that from the beginning of the universe every particle of God’s light has had the ultimate goal of guiding our feet into the way of peace—peace meaning not just the absence of violence, but the presence of the things that make for peace. The light of the sun, the light of the first living cell, the light of Jesus, the light of these Advent candles, all moving us toward peace.

The Greek New Testament word translated as peace is *eirēnē*, which comes from a root meaning to join. Peace means to be joined in harmony. It means oneness, the Golden Rule, an equitable sufficiency of life’s essentials for all, showing tender mercy not because of the

worthiness of the other but because that is how the light of God within us wants to shine through us.

Imagine believing that God's love is flowing through and around every being or object in the universe trying to guide it into the way of oneness and peace. The only question is, how long will it take it to get there? How long will obstacles knock it careening in chaos before the gravity of love will draw it into cosmic harmony?

Five dangerous convicts escaped from prison in Tennessee in 1984. One got separated from the others and showed up at the house of Nathan and Louise Degrafinried. Nathan answered the door to find a shotgun pointing at his chest. Louise was on the phone with a neighbor and whispered to her to call the police. The convict forced his way into the house, but Louise came right up to him and said, "I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in violence. Put down that gun and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here."

She then proceeded to give him dry socks and feed him breakfast, holding his hand and praying with him and telling him that she loved him and God loved him.

When the police came, she told the convict to keep eating, and she went out and said, "Y'all put those guns away. I don't allow no violence here." She told them the young man would come out when he had finished his breakfast. He came out with his hands on his head, leaving the shotgun behind on the sofa.

Louise and Nathan refused to press charges. She and the young man wrote letters back and forth. She worked for his release. He called her on her birthday and every Christmas for the rest of her life.

I have been talking recently about the spiritual path that early contemplative and mystical Christians teachers saw in Jesus, and found for themselves. The traditional Greek words for that path are kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. These are worth learning and internalizing, because they describe the path to peace in the heart and in the world, a path we see in Louise.

Kenosis means self-emptying, it means getting the ego out of the way and into its rightful place to serve as an instrument of the Spirit's light and love and peace. We need kenosis, letting go of self-concern, in order to be able to do the kind of act that Louise did.

Kenosis is the shift we make toward our spiritual mind. Mark Kutolowski talked about this in his sermon last month, and you can read more about it on his [Metanoia of Vermont website](#). There he writes:

“When we enter into this level of mind, we experience peace, stillness, and freedom that are beyond what can be known from the primitive or the rational minds.... By ‘letting go’ of our emotions, thoughts, fears and desires, we leave space for a deeper, more subtle level of perception.”

Louise may not have been there all the time, she may have lost it occasionally when Nathan left the cap off the toothpaste, but she clearly had practiced kenosis through faith and prayer enough to be able to set self-concern aside and gain her spiritual mind in a moment of crisis.

Letting go of self leads to a level of consciousness that is capable of seeing as God sees, seeing all things with tender mercy. Kenosis leads to metanoia, having the mind of Christ, and then metanoia leads to agape, having the heart of Christ. Mark writes, “Unconditional love flows forth from the spiritual mind, as we see and experience the unity of all life in God.... We no longer require people to be like us.... We all share in the same spirit, so it becomes easy (on this level) to love all, without regard to conditions.”

Imagine a church or town or nation or world where people actually could see their oneness with all others regardless of differences, where all were able to love their neighbor truly as themselves, as diverse manifestations of the same spirit. This is what koinonia means, the community of peace and the things that make for peace that kenosis, metanoia and agape naturally create.

That is the community Louise created with the convict and the police. It is what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community.

John the Baptist, his father Zechariah and the Prince of Peace himself all ask us to believe that this is the relationship to the world that the spirit of the universe is always trying to guide our feet into, through its light of love.

Imagine being able to believe that in every second of your life, even in your darkest night of soul, by the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high is breaking upon you, to give light to you so that you can give light to others who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to

guide your feet into the way of peace so that you may bring peace and the things that make for peace into the world around you.

Can you believe this? Can you see how that light wants to guide your feet to peace in your life right now?

Let us pray together in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

It snowed last night.
A chickadee found the hanging
feeder full of seed.