

*Discerning What “Prince of Peace” We Hope Will Come*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*December 3, 2023 Second Sunday of Advent, Candle of Peace*  
*Isaiah 40:1-5, 10-11; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 1:68–79*

**Silent Prayer of Invocation:** The way of the Spirit is the way of peace. Jesus taught us to discern the Spirit’s way through every situation. Henry Nouwen says, “I can see no other way for discernment than a life in the Spirit, a life of unceasing prayer and contemplation.” We hope so deeply for peace, we yearn to know how we can bring peace into this world, so let us become centered and open our hearts to the Spirit’s powers of discernment, comfort and strength. And let us sing from our hearts as a prayer of yearning the fourth verse of O Come, O Come Emmanuel:

O come, Desire of Nations, bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind.  
Bid envy, strife and warfare cease.  
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee O Israel!

**Welcome:** Good morning! Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Peace. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome also to those of you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people.

We honor the ways in which the highest ideals of both indigenous peoples and this church create communities that are building blocks of peace, rising from a foundation of oneness and respect for all.

Our Open and Affirming covenant says that we “regard all people as beloved children of God. We give thanks for the many and diverse gifts of God among us.... We honor the worth and dignity of all people. We affirm all relationships founded on the principles of love, justice, the Golden Rule and treating others as they wish to be treated.”

These are things that make for peace. So please extend your love and care to the people around you, both in person and on Zoom, greeting especially those you do not know and those you know are struggling so all may find comfort in this loving community.

**Call to Worship:** 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... 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.”

Sometimes within that yearning we find a candle or star giving comfort and peace. Let us worship together in that hope.

**Advent Candle Lighting:** It is a joy to honor two committees that have made a huge difference in the life of this congregation in the past year, working hard for peace and the things that make for peace. I invite the members of the Mission and Fulfilling Our Vision Committees to come forward for the lighting of the Advent candles...

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 long ago in China in the religion of 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, teaching us to trust and connecting us to the Spirit. The way of Christ leads to peace in the home and world by helping us to be compassionate and kind, and to accept and include all people, and to treat 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.”

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.

**[readers or children light two purple candles]**

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, restorative justice to the victims of violence, and inclusion of all people and all the earth in our love and care, that they too may have peace.

Prayer brings peace, so let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

***Discerning What “Prince of Peace” We Hope Will Come***

Gus Speth recently published an essay and poem in *Orion Magazine*. Here is the poem, entitled “New Consciousness:”

Decades of discourse  
led by lawyers,  
scientists, economists,  
and we are stuck.

They can’t do what must be done:  
reach the human heart.

The deep problems are  
avarice, arrogance and apathy,  
our dominant values gone astray.

We need not more analysis  
but a spiritual awakening,  
a new consciousness.  
So bring on the preachers and prophets!  
the poets and philosophers!  
the psychologists and psychiatrists!  
Bring on the writers, musicians, actors, artists!  
Bring on the dreamers!  
Call them to strike the chords  
of our shared humanity,  
of our close kin to wild things!  
Call them to help find a new world!

Gus quotes novelist Richard Flannagan, who asks, “What reality was ever created by realists?... What we cannot dream we can never do.”

Dreamers are the only realists when it comes to peace on earth. As the practical dreamer, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Realists who say that humanity cannot change cannot change human reality. Only dreamers can do that, and if we are serious about seeking the Spirit and working for peace, there is one group of dreamers we especially need to heed.

The contemplative tradition in every religion has made a science of how to find and be filled with the Spirit, how to be led and empowered by it, how to be comforted by it in the worst of circumstances and how to be instruments of its peace in the world.

The Prophet Isaiah advocated contemplative practices of returning and rest, quietness and trust, and dreamed of governmental practices ruled by a Prince of Peace and gentle shepherd. The priest Zechariah spent nine months in contemplative silence and then when his son, John the Baptist, was born he shared his prophetic dream: “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.”

We are blessed to live in a time when the contemplative dimension of every religion is making advances to help transform consciousness and connect with the Spirit. Buddhists have been working with brain scientists. Father Thomas Keating, the leading teacher of Centering Prayer, joined modern psychology to the ancient Christian contemplative tradition.

Another contemporary contemplative, Franciscan Richard Rohr, founded the Center for Contemplation and Action. He says that the most important word in that name is “and.”

He is not alone in connecting the two. The Great Peacemaker of the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee was a force of contemplation and action before Europeans came to this continent. Mahatma Gandhi spent hours every day in meditation as he waged his nonviolent revolution in India. He said, “My greatest weapon is mute prayer.” Thomas Merton, Howard Thurman and Dorothy Day were 20<sup>th</sup> Century American contemplatives who were activists and gave their lives to transform humanity in the direction of oneness and peace.

The wisdom that all these traditions and teachers share is that if we are serious about experiencing inner peace and working for outer peace, then we need the continual practice of self-emptying (*kenosis*), what Gandhi called reducing the self to zero, which he saw gave a person the greatest power possible.

The Welcoming Practice of the Centering Prayer tradition does this by letting go of our ego’s excessive desires for approval and affection, power and control, security and survival. Thomas Keating added that we need to let go of over-identifying with any group, including religion or nation, so that we can discern and follow the Spirit that spans all borders.

Henry Nouwen, another 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian contemplative, talks about this in his book *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. Nouwen quotes Thomas Merton who wrote about the courage, freedom and power that come from self-emptying.

Listen to what Nouwen says, because this could be a mission statement for Advent: “Detachment, for Merton, does not mean shirking one’s responsibilities. Rather, it is a radical stance in the world that makes it possible to move unafraid into the center of evil and not be destroyed by it. If you claim nothing as your own, including your own life, you can expose...the false basis of war and violence by refusing any compromise with evil. The self-emptied person is the true revolutionary in the world. How might we stand aside from all our [ego] demands and

desires in this age of consumerism and militarism and seek peace within, peace for our immediate community and peace in the world?” (p. 90)

Advent traditionally is a season for waiting, expecting and preparing, for increasing spiritual practices, and for helping people in need—in other words for contemplation *and* action. The wisdom of our spiritual tradition gives us this intentional season of self-emptying and courageously engaging the shadows cast by the human ego both in our hearts and in the injustices and violence perpetrated by ego-driven governments and corporations.

Advent leads us to the light of the Spirit that shines in the darkness, and then it sends us out with that light of Christ in us to help those who sit in darkness of any form.

If you are serious about seeking Spirit and being an instrument of peace, then immerse in Advent. Immerse in the music, the candles, the beauty of snowflakes or stars, immerse in spiritual reading and meditation, immerse even in Christmas movies if they inspire you to go out and bring hurting people the things that make for peace, as Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* inspired the people of his day.

Immerse most of all in the light that is coming at Christmas, the child born in oneness with lowly animals and refugees in unhoused poverty, the child who grew up to urge us to lose our life to gain it, whose entire life was Spirit filled and Spirit led and whose favorite greeting was “Peace be with you.” The “Prince of Peace” does not impose peace through violence, he brings peace to birth through self-emptied, unconditional, universal love.

Jesus calls us each to do the same, and so in a real sense we are the Prince of Peace, we are the humanity the Spirit is trying to evolve to save this precious world.

We are the dreamers Advent hopes to transform into candles of Christ’s light.

Let us pray in silence, emptying ourselves of thoughts, letting our feelings rest as they are, making room for the Spirit of hope and peace to fill us...

**Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz**

Peace restores the soul  
As a steady gentle rain  
Makes barren land whole.