

## **Into the Way of Peace**

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Malachi 3:1-4  
Luke 1:68-79  
Luke 3:1-6

Advent is in full swing — or as holiday marketers would have you believe, Christmas is here already! The halls are being decked, the trees are being trimmed, the eggs are being nugged, and though I'm sure most of us don't even quite know what they are, visions of sugar-plums are already infiltrating our dreams.

This is the one season of the year where most churches seem to catch on to the idea that Jesus' coming to Earth had something to do with peace. It pops up in a lot of Christmas carols, so it is kind of hard to avoid. As the angelic choir first sang, so we sing of "peace on Earth and goodwill to all people." In fact, one of the most popular carols in the English language also carries the most explicit protest for peace. Take a look at number 195 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. In stanza three of "It came upon a midnight clear" we sing of the 2,000 years of warfare that have gone on in defiance of the angelic song:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife,  
    the world has suffered long;  
beneath the heav'nly hymn have rolled  
    two thousand years of wrong,  
and warring humankind hears not  
    the tidings which they bring.  
O hush the noise and cease your strife  
    and hear the angels sing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund H. Sears, *Christian Register*, 1849.

In the final stanza, we look forward to the day when humanity will finally and fully join the song: "...when peace shall over all the Earth/ its ancient splendors fling,/ and the whole world send back the song/ which now the angels sing."

This is one of those hymns where singing only the first verse can be deadly. If we leave it with "The world in solemn stillness lay,/ to hear the angels sing" then our role in the coming peace of the incarnation is passive, saccharine and sentimental.

I think that's the image that many people have of peace coming to Earth at Christmas — a peace that floats down upon the Earth like a down comforter made from angel feathers. I also suppose that is why many of the same people don't take seriously the idea that peace is at the heart of God's intent for the world as well as Jesus' mission in coming to earth in the first place. If "peace on Earth" is a passive phenomenon, something of which we are recipients; or if it is something exclusively internal, as in "I have the peace of Christ in my heart," then it is demonstrably phony. The angels sang "peace on Earth," and yet there is no peace. War rages; conflicts erupt. A president who was greeted with Messianic expectation orders a surge of military might in order to pacify a country. What "peace on Earth?"

And as for an internalized "peace," sure, there's something to that — some people have an incredible sense of peace about them. But these same people also experience depression, the "dark night of the soul," frustration, and anger. That doesn't sound like "peace on Earth" either.

Reading the Advent text for today — these fiery passages full of prophecy about John the Baptist’s ministry — it struck me that our perception of “peace on Earth” will be incomplete unless we account for how these writers understood the coming of “peace.” For them, the arrival of the Messiah (and before him, his messenger) was not about an esoteric abstract “peace;” rather it was about *personification* — “peace” arriving in the form of a person. God incarnate became “peace on Earth.” And in turn, we are called to also personify “peace on Earth.”

This is what John prepared people for — this is why there is all this talk about refiners fires, repentance and forgiveness, purification and righteousness. John did not prepare people to *experience* peace on Earth, but to *become* that peace — to live it, to breathe it, to share it.

Notice that each of these passages talk about “preparing the way.” In Malachi, the messenger (whom we read as John the Baptist) is sent to “prepare the way” so that the one whom we seek “will suddenly come to his temple.” In Luke 3, we read the words of Isaiah, again used to describe John’s ministry. He is “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” And in Luke 1, John the Baptist’s father sings to him that he “will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”

This “way” that John prepared was not simply a path for Jesus to follow. John was not a wilderness guide hacking away branches so his patron could

pass through. Rather, it was a new path for all of us to follow Jesus on. Note that early Christians, before they had names assigned to them by the authorities, referred to themselves as “followers of the Way.”

Zachariah goes on to describe Jesus’ coming, and makes explicit the idea that this is a “way” in which we were all to participate. He sings, “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.”

To guide our feet into the way of peace. This is the purpose of Jesus’ coming. He is the light that breaks through the darkness to become our “way.”

The “Peace on Earth” that we’ll sing about with the angels in a few short weeks is the “way” that John prepared. It is not something we cuddle up in front of the fire and sip along with our peppermint cocoa; it is where we place our feet, and how we use our hands. It is the vocation of every follower of Christ’s way.

Just as Jesus became the Way of Peace incarnate, so we are called to incarnate peace. Incarnation means becoming flesh. Those of you who know a romance language (or have been to a Mexican restaurant) will recognize the root “carne” — literally, meat. The incarnation is the “making meat” of God. We are invited, by becoming travelers on the way of Christ, to “make meat” out of peace — to give it flesh — to transform our very bodies into instruments of peace.

How do we enflesh Christ’s being? One of the places where we are most viscerally joined to him and to one another is around the communion table.

For some folks, talk of the spiritual experience of communion may sound similar to the understanding of “Peace on Earth” that I was making light of earlier. Communion can also be seen as an empty act, a vain ritual, or, slightly better, an inward spiritual experience that doesn’t have bearing on the rest of our lives. Or they might view communion as a community building experience, or an opportunity to renew a personal commitment to holiness. Historically and biblically, however, communion has much stronger implications for how we understand one another and participate in the world. Paul makes a big deal out of making no distinction between classes at the table — it was a place of equality and economic sharing. Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups tangibly enacted making peace at the table by requiring that member make peace with one another before receiving the elements. This, as many of you know, led to communion becoming strongly associated with Church discipline and being severely abused in many congregations. Reaction against such abuse led to a more spiritualized and more benign form that lacked some of the drama.

And then there’s the Mennonite resistance to the idea of transubstantiation. We do not believe, as Catholics do, that the bread and wine literally transform into the flesh and blood of Christ. And since we react against that, we’ve tended to think of communion in strictly symbolic terms, subtracting any sacramental reality.

What if we choose to believe that God is actually at work here somehow? What if we choose to believe that Christ calls us to the table because it is important — even essential — for us to become who he calls us to be?

However you understand the combination of spiritual and physical phenomenon, this is where we take Jesus' flesh and blood, and make it part of our own. This is where we incarnate; this is where we make meat. Communion is about *becoming*.

If communion is about becoming, then the baggage that some of us may have about worthiness and preparation becomes a much smaller piece of the whole. The only precondition here, as for a meal, is hunger. If we desire to become more of Christ, then the table is for us. This is a powerful, even earth-shaking thing.

Whenever we take communion, we remember Jesus' words as he prepared to die; however, in a way, what we re-enact is his birth — God becoming flesh in the world all over again, in each of us, and in all of us as a community.

If you desire to embody "peace on Earth," then the table is for you. I invite all of you to come without hesitation or fear. "And 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."