

What did you expect?

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Matthew 2:13-23
Hebrews 2:10-18

Peace on Earth! Good will to all people! Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace! Did you see the Post this morning? As of Christmas, universal peace has been declared. American soldiers are playing soccer with the Taliban. Israelis and Palestinians have converted the Dome of the Rock into an inter-faith house of worship and all sides are happy with the deal. The two rival presidents of the Ivory Coast decided to work together, alternating Monday through Thursday and taking Fridays off. The drug cartels in Mexico have switched to dealing healthy, organic snack foods. Rival gangs right here in Prince George's County have exchanged their guns for pitch pipes and are preparing to resolve their disputes as contestants in next year's "Sing-off."

Peace on Earth!

No?

Well, what did we expect?

Is Christmas the culmination of unrealistic expectations, like the kid who wants a real horse and gets a My Little Pony instead? Are we living a pipe-dream of a baby that brings peace to the world?

I remember distinctly a conversation I had with my best friend in middle school. He is Jewish; I was Baptist at the time. We were discussing our faiths. He told me that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah. Why? Just look around. The world has not been saved. The Messiah will bring peace: the wolf and the

lamb, the calf and the bear, etcetera. If Jesus was the Messiah, why do we still live in this fallen world of war?

Our Advent theme this season has been expecting the unexpected. We often talk about how Jesus came in an unexpected way; not as a triumphant king, but as a helpless infant. Not descending from the clouds with claps of thunder, but born just like the rest of us mortals. Not with miraculous wisdom or power, but weak and fragile like any other baby.

But beyond that, every year we have this cycle of delusion — we tell ourselves throughout Advent that Peace is coming to Earth. And we wake up on Dec. 26 to the same old stories, repeating as they have for millennia, with ever more deadly weapons. The Earth is not at peace.

Why do we put ourselves through this every year? Are we lying to ourselves? What did we expect?

Matthew gives us a stark warning in his infancy narrative. Christ has come, but all is not right with the world. The Eastern sorcerers depart, and the Holy Family has to pack up and head to Egypt. The king has made the kind of heartless and bureaucratic decision that comes with the mentality of empire. If there is a rival, a threat to power, a coming king, then the threat must be stopped. Shock and awe. Pre-emptive strike. Wipe out opposition. If you are not for us, you are against us.

And as happens whenever an empire makes decisions like this, babies die. Sometimes it is bombs, sometimes it is swords, sometimes it is sanctions, but the mentality of power permits, and even encourages, this kind of bloodshed.

This story in Matthew has been somewhat sensationalized over the years — we have been given stories of thousands of children slaughtered. There is a church in Israel that purports to hold the bones of these first martyrs — stacks and stacks of skulls — never mind that they've been dated to a much later era and are primarily from adults. But actually, given the size of Bethlehem and some simple demographics, we're probably talking about no more than a couple dozen children. This reminds me of those studies about empathy. Tell a group of people about the millions of starving children in the third world and ask for donations. Tell another group about one starving child in India and ask for donations. The latter will receive much more money because it puts a face on the crisis. So think of the slaughter of the innocents this way — not 14,000 children, as some traditions claim — but 20 children. And all from your small community. You are related to many of them. You know their parents. You've held some of them in your lap. This is not a massacre in the abstract, but a personal tragedy.

Matthew moves us so quickly, so directly, into confronting the reality of the world — that the coming of Jesus did not mean the end to warfare. He did not break the bow and shatter the spear. The sword of the oppressor still ruled the land. The wolf and the lamb may lie down together, but it is not going to end well for the lamb.

Merry Christmas.

This is one of those sermons that calls for a gigantic “but wait!” I've spent a good chunk of time being thoroughly depressing, and this is still Christmas. There's got to be a glimmer of hope, right? A light in the darkness? Otherwise,

why do we come here, Sunday after Sunday? Why do we still pursue the impossible dream of peace? Why have two millennia of Christians devoted their lives to serving Christ if what we expected to happen — the dawn of a new age — did not come to pass?

Here is what Jesus gives us — not Peace on Earth, but the promise of peace. Not peace as a cosmic miracle, but as a covenant. Peace not as an instant end to violence, but as a vocation. Peace comes, like furniture from Ikea, with assembly required.

The coming of Christ is God's new covenant with us. We are called brothers and sisters of Christ. In this new adoption by God, we are given the key to peace. The passage from Hebrews helps to explain this:

“...he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”¹

Because we are brothers and sisters of Christ who shared our flesh and blood, the one who brought resurrection to that same human frailty, we do not need to fear death.

Fear of death leads to violence; freedom from that fear makes peace possible. If I fear death, I will value my own life more highly than that of someone attacking me. If I do not fear death, I can hold our lives in equal value. If I fear death, then I must work for the protection of myself, my family, my community, and my country, placing all other things as a lesser priority. If I am free from the fear of death, then I have nothing to fear from any perceived threats, ‘foreign or

¹ Hebrews 2:14b-15

domestic.’ If I fear death, then I stay home and work for the good of those around me. If I do not fear death, then I can venture to the places where death reigns in the world. To the centers of violence and injustice. Because just as perfect love casts out all fear, so fear casts out love. Fear prevents us from serving others; fear prevents us from making peace. Freedom from fear means freedom to serve, freedom to love and freedom to become peacemakers.

There is a distinction, I think, between fear and anxiety. Anxiety is natural. Of course we worry about death. Of course we worry about pain and suffering and of course we don’t want our families to suffer. Healthy anxiety informs our actions; fear inhibits our actions. And we still may and will suffer. We will know pain. We will know death. But our approach to death is infused with the hope of the resurrection, because we are siblings of Christ.

Death is the ultimate weapon of evil and empire. The root of the empire’s power is the threat of violence, and the promise of violence is ultimately death. This is what the coming of Peace on Earth means for us — that the empire no longer holds this power over us, because we do not fear death.

The angels still sing “Peace on Earth.” Though
“with the woes of sin and strife,
the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled
two thousand years of wrong,
and warring humankind hears not the
tidings which they bring...”

Still we join in the song. Still we work for the day

“when peace shall over all the Earth

its ancient splendors fling,

and the whole world send back the song

which now the angels sing.”²

² Edmund H. Sears, “It came upon a midnight clear,” 1849.