

A Longing and Desire for Peace

Wouldn't it be nice if the war in Iraq were over? Wouldn't it be nice if Jews and Palestinians could start to live together in peace? Wouldn't it be nice if the Muslim and Christian factions in Africa could begin living in peace? Wouldn't it be nice if the Chinese and Taiwanese could get along? Or the Pakistanis and Indians? Well, you name the country or continent, and there's probably some kind of war, conflict or aggression going on. Wouldn't it be nice if there were peace on earth?

If there couldn't be peace on earth, wouldn't it be nice if we could have peace within our own country? Peace between blacks and whites? Between liberals and conservatives? Between Protestants and Catholics? Wouldn't it be nice if there was peace within our own country?

If none of all this were possible, then wouldn't it be nice if there could be peace within our families? Or even peace within ourselves?

For most people on the Earth, peace in one form or another is something we lack, and it's something we desperately wish we had. I believe that, deep within each of us, there exists a God-given desire and longing for peace: within our own lives, within our families, within our nation, and throughout the world.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah felt the same way. He had the same longing and desire for peace that we still have.

The year was 700 B.C., and the Jews had been fighting for forty years. First they fought against the Assyrians, and then they fought against the Egyptians. Then they fought with the Assyrians again, and then again with the Egyptians. Throughout this period of time, Jewish and Assyrian and Egyptian children were brought up to be familiar with the tools and techniques of war. Spears and swords were as familiar as common toys. The rules of a particular game were as familiar as any rules of engagement.

Try to imagine living at such a time and in such a place. Try to imagine a life where, from childhood to adulthood, warfare and conflict and aggression were as familiar to you as almost anything else you can imagine. That's how it was for Isaiah, and he was tired of it. He was tired of forty years of warfare. He was tired of people and nations trying to destroy each other.

Isaiah longed for peace, but not simply because he was tired of war. There was more to it. Isaiah had read the book of Genesis; he had learned that God created the human race to live together in peace. Isaiah reasoned correctly that it was not in God's plan for human beings to fight with each other.

It was not God's intent for parents and children, or husbands and wives, or blacks and whites, or Arabs and Israelis, Russians and Americans, Muslims and Christians, to be at war with each other. That wasn't how God made us. We were made in the image and likeness of God. We are, in some

fashion, like God. We have been created with the social and emotional tools that enable us to co-exist in peace and harmony and love, and in such a way that mirrors the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And so, when we engage in conflict, when we make war, we are going against the way we were made, and we feel it in our gut. Saint Paul would describe that feeling, that sense we have in the pit of our stomach when we are engaged in conflict, as the visceral awareness of the incompatibility of our actions with the will of God.

Isaiah was too aware of this feeling, and he longed for peace. Above all things, he wished for himself, for his people, and for all nations, to return to that state in which God had created them.

And so, Isaiah dreamt of peace. He had visions which he recorded, and which are preserved for us:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. *Isaiah 11:6-9*

Why does it always seem to be the case that, when things seem to be at their worst, there are always those who dream of peace? The simplest answer would be to say that it was God's grace. It is by the grace of God that, when we need it the most, there is an Isaiah, or a Gandhi, or a Martin Luther King to raise their voice above the clamor of conflict and issue the call for peace. The simplest answer, and perhaps the only answer, is God's grace. But how do we find this peace?

The first step is to put God first in our lives; to put the will, and the longing and the desire of God before our own. And that means before our ego and our pride, before our economic self-interests, and before the demands and expectations of culture or ethnicity or nationality. It means putting God first before everything else and allowing him to reshape our actions, and even the way we think, so that it conforms to that which God intends. And we begin this process, which indeed may last the duration of our lifetime, by praying in private, by worshiping in public, by reading the Bible and the writings of godly men and women. And, perhaps most important of all, by recommitting yourself to this process every day of your life.

And then, once people have made this first step, the fruit of their efforts will be righteousness – right relationships with each other. And these will be relationships marked by gentleness and kindness, by patience and forgiveness, and by hope. These will be relationships of a peace that surpasses our understanding.

Finally, when we have begun to enjoy relationships of peace, we will become aware of a desire for justice. It is a truth found throughout the Bible that justice and peace are inextricably linked; you

cannot have one without the other. There can be no peace when people are oppressed or marginalized, when people are abused or mistreated, when people are kept from realizing their potential as children of God.

And so, people who have finally chosen to put God first in their lives, and who have begun to experience relationships of peace and tranquility, will naturally be drawn to seek these very things for those around them, and more, to seek justice and equality as well.

None of these things can happen on their own. A personal commitment to God, and right relationships, and justice will not take place spontaneously. It takes our willingness and our efforts. And there are no shortcuts. One step must follow upon another. And though we might desire it, there are no quick and easy solutions.

In a few weeks, we'll be celebrating the birthday of Jesus. We'll be hearing the ancient stories that describe how the angels sang to the shepherds:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth
peace among those with whom he is pleased! *Luke 2:14*

“...peace among those with whom [God] is pleased!” That’s an important part of their song. For we need to remember that God is pleased when we put him first in our lives. God is pleased when our relationships are marked by godliness and righteousness. God is pleased when we work for justice for all people. And it pleases God to see that the fruit of all our efforts is a peace on earth between all his children.

Wouldn't it be nice if there were peace on earth? Wouldn't it be nice if there were peace within our own country? Or, at the very least, wouldn't it be nice if we could enjoy peace within our families or within ourselves? Despite what some cynics may proclaim, peace can become a reality in our lives. Made in the image and likeness of God, we have been created for peace, and we long for peace.

This season of Advent, and the coming season of Christmas reminds us that, because we are a people who hope for peace, occasionally there arises from among us men and women who, like Isaiah, envision the sort of peace we might have:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and
the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. *Isaiah 11:6*

Let us pray: O God our heavenly Father, you have blessed us and given us dominion over all the earth: Increase our reverence before the mystery of life; and give us new insight into your purposes for the human race, and new wisdom and determination in making provision for its future in accordance with your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *Book of Common Prayer, pg 828.*