

The Prince of Peace

Isaiah 9:2-7

Reverend Laurie DeMott

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“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given... And he shall be called ‘Prince of peace.’”

As most of you know, I studied Biology as an undergraduate student but after receiving my Bachelor degree, I changed course and went into seminary for my graduate studies. It was 1980 and I was the tender age of 22 when I entered Colgate Rochester Divinity School and most of my classmates were also fresh out of college. Some of us were eager to begin our theological studies and some of us were nervous and uncertain of our career path but all of us were pretty green and untested. And it didn’t take long for us to recognize our inexperience. In fact, it took only one day when, at the end of our very first class, we were given our very first assignment.

“For tomorrow,” our professor¹ informed us, “I would like you to write a funeral sermon. I want you to imagine that you are the pastor of a family whose 10 year old son has just died. His father was working in the garage on a project when some chemicals accidentally caused an explosion and killed his son who was standing nearby. What would you say at the boy’s funeral? Remember, you will be speaking not only to a grieving family, but to his friends and schoolmates, and to his father who is racked with guilt. Have your papers ready to hand in at the beginning of class tomorrow. Welcome to ministry.”

As our professor took his leave, the anxiety he left in his wake was palpable. We gathered our books and shuffled out the door, speculating that perhaps the assignment was designed to weed out the faint hearted and each of us privately worried that we would be one of those weeded out because the task seemed frankly impossible.

“The only funeral I’ve been to was my grandfather’s,” one classmate complained, “and he was 95 and died in his sleep. What can I possibly say to the family of a 10 year old boy?”

Another said, “I haven’t even unpacked my bags yet. I was hoping we’d do some bible study first or talk about liberation theology. I’m hardly ready to tackle guilt and inconsolable grief.”

And so, with much moaning and groaning, my fellow students and I headed back to our rooms where we tapped away at our typewriters (this was, remember, the 20th century BC — Before Computers) and wrestled long into the night trying to find words that might bring comfort to the afflicted. I remember to this day what I wrote: my sermon was all about the promise of eternity and there was the soaring of trumpets in it somewhere and I got a B+ on it, which honestly disappointed me because I thought that my sermon had been beautifully crafted and deserved better. I was only 22 and I hadn’t yet learned that eloquent writing can be akin to the emperor’s new clothes. But I was to learn that lesson soon enough.

At our next class, our professor handed back our papers and commended our efforts on what he admitted was a very difficult assignment. “I only gave out one A,” he said, “and I would like you to hear that A sermon. Teri, would you please come up here and read your paper to the class?”

Teri reluctantly came to the front of the class. While many of her classmates had an obvious liking for the spotlight of the pulpit, Teri was a shy unpretentious young woman and was obviously uncomfortable being singled out but as she began to read, the quiet of her voice fell over us.

“Peace I leave with you;” she read from the gospel of John, “my peace I give to you. I do not give it to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” In the hush of her words there was room to breathe; room to weep. Her words carved out a safe place for grieving hearts because they didn’t argue with death; they didn’t judge the past; her words didn’t even attempt to explain the mystery of human mortality. They simply embraced those listening with their presence. While I had ended my finely crafted piece with glorious heavenly trumpets, she finished with just one word: “Peace.”

To the mother whose son had been stolen away by death, she said, “Peace.”

To the father burdened with guilt, chained to a moment he would give his own life to undo, she whispered, “Peace.”

To little children struggling with the confusion of loss in their too young hearts: “Peace.”

To a room of seminarians wondering how they would ever find the words to heal the grief of the world: “Peace.”

To all of the lost, and lonely, and broken, and uncertain: “Peace.”

I can still hear the soft assurance of that word tucking us into the warmth of its embrace: “Peace.” When she was finished, we sat in silence for a few moments absorbing the mystery of what we were experiencing, and then our professor told us what most of us had by then recognized.

“You tried to explain Christ’s promise of peace,” he said. “You spoke to people’s minds, but Teri spoke to their hearts and used her words to hold them in Christ’s peace like a mother soothing a weeping child. The Bible says that Christ’s peace passes all our understanding which means that we don’t always have to explain it. In fact, we *can’t* always explain it. Sometimes we just have to remind people of its promise and wrap them in it.”

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given... And his name shall be called wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of peace.”

In the 38 years of my ministry, if I ever managed to bring comfort to a grieving heart, I owe it to the lesson that my classmate Teri Kuehn² taught me in my very first week of seminary. On that day, I learned that Christ’s peace is something I will never understand, and will never be able to explain, but that Christ’s peace is something that I can trust as real. And since that day, that conviction has been confirmed. I have seen the peace of Christ steal upon broken hearts that looked beyond repair and yet, through his peace, those hearts have come to love and dream and even laugh once more. I have seen Christ’s peace open the mouths of those who are afraid to speak, giving them courage to challenge the injustice that is destroying their neighbor. I have seen Christ’s peace move the most truculent heart to admit wrongdoing and bring forgiveness where no one thought forgiveness was possible. I have seen Christ’s peace turn enemies into friends, and sow reconciliation in the midst of strife. I have seen Christ’s peace provide a place of rest to the most troubled soul.

Perhaps you too, have seen such things; perhaps you are the one to whom it has happened. Christ’s peace does indeed pass all understanding, and it will never be something that we completely explain but faith promises that it is real. It may come upon us suddenly in a healing act of generosity

from a stranger, through a unexpected re-birth of purpose, or even through our own sudden conviction that we are ready to stand once again, but more often it steals upon us gradually through prayer and the healing offered by a community of faith. However, it comes, we can trust in its promise and wrap it tightly around our hurting hearts.

My prayer for you this Christmas is that you may hear and trust in this promise: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And his name shall be called, 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting father, Prince of peace.'"

Footnotes:

1. Dr. Thomas Troeger
2. Now Reverend Teri Twist