

Pastor Tyler's 2023 Advent Devotional

Circles of Peace

Advent, Day 1--December 3, 2023

It's that time of year again, loved ones! My favorite liturgical season is upon us, which means that I will joyfully be sharing some reflections with you.

This year, the [First Presbyterian Church of Highland](#) is being guided by the Holy Spirit in the Adventen theme "Circles of Peace." With genocide being perpetrated in Gaza and Darfur, with Hamas' horrific attack on kibbutzim and festival goers, with wars raging in the Maghreb and Myanmar and Ukraine, with conflicts on the verge of exploding in so many other places, with hate crimes and mass shootings and gun violence that our country shrugs off as commonplace, with age-old hatred of women and migrants and LGBTQ+ folks continuing to traumatize, with our collective anxieties from years of pandemic, we need to learn how to find peace and weave peace in this season of expectant hope for the coming of the Prince of Peace! Our circles of peace are concentric, starting with inner peace and moving into interpersonal peace, world peace, and peace with God.

Please feel free to use these as devotions. Please feel free to engage with them interactively in comments. Our circle of peace needs to keep getting bigger and bigger!

For today's reflection, as I tend to do on the Sundays of Advent, I offer an excerpt from the sermon I preached, entitled "Hope: The Source of Inner Peace." As you read, I invite you to focus on your breathing. After, doing a breath prayer. I recommend inhaling with, "God of peace," and exhaling with, "Give us peace." Here goes:

The ancient Israelites had no idea who the messiah was going to be or when the messiah was going to come or where the messiah was going to arrive. And yet, in all this vagueness of person, place, and time, they trusted the promise that had been given by the prophets. And because they trusted that promise, they had this powerful thing called hope. I am convinced that it was hope that got the Israelites through all of those trials and travails over all those years. For, without hope, I don't think they would have made it. They had communal, generational trauma. Generation after generation they suffered through war, displacement, and poverty. Much like Palestinians today. Much like migrants across the world today. Much like marginalized communities in the United States today.

I, of course, never provided mental health services to the ancient Israelites. But I have had the privilege of doing so with the modern groups I just mentioned. And let me tell you, communal, generational trauma has detrimental impacts throughout life. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health are all endangered by complex PTSD. Being in perpetual survival mode causes this persistent anxiety that can be destabilizing and debilitating.

I am overwhelmed on a daily basis by people's ability to keep going, to live in the midst of the struggle. And what I have found over and over is that it is hope for the possibility of moving from surviving to thriving that helps to calm the storm within. Hope is the source of inner peace. And such was certainly the case for the ancient Israelites!

They believed that the God who created them and made a covenant with them and led them through the wilderness and anointed their kings would come through once again in their time of greatest need and save them. This hope kept them alive as a people. In those deepest, darkest moments of slavery, migration, division, exile, and colonization, they had held onto a hope that their God would send somebody sometime.

And there they were, toiling under the absurd client kingdom of the Herods, who served the emperors of Rome, whose power could only be compared to that of the Pharaohs of yore. Yes, this is the most apt parallel. The Israelites were once again under the merciless whip of the Pharaohs.

One could not have blamed them for giving up at this point, this point of seeing their storied history of oppression and liberation coming full circle back to forced servitude to a pharaonic master. By all logical indicators, they should have given up. They should have despaired. But instead, with those abstract promises of a messiah in hand, they hoped. And they survived. And they persisted. For this struggling, occupied group of exploited laborers in the empire, hope had to be a way of life, a prevailing theme of existence.

You all know me by now, and so you know that I absolutely love the delicate intricacies and bold connections of written and spoken language. I have always been fascinated by the transcendence of certain words and concepts across multiple, seemingly unrelated languages.

And I've been consistently amazed by how certain words are bound to each other in the ways that they are spoken and heard. Perhaps this is why I am so drawn to the image of the Word becoming flesh. Anyway, I was a student of Latin for much of my younger life. Latin would have been the language of the day for the Israelites under Roman control. As soon as I learned the words spero and spiro, I would never again be able to separate them from each other. Spero—S-P-E-R-O means “I hope.” Spiro—S-P-I-R-O means “I breathe.” In some grand divine scheme from the miracle of Babel, I know that the closeness of these words is not coincidental. I breathe, I hope. I hope, I breathe. For the Israelites under Roman occupation, every breath meant hope. And every moment of hope meant more breathing, more life. And as the fragile intricacies of language would have it, the name of the God of their hope was YHWH, that sacred name which evokes breathing. YHWH. Breath. Hope. It's for good reason that we so often use regulated breathing exercises to calm down in the midst of anxiety and panic--I practice them myself and guide patients through them every day! It's for good reason that we are using breath prayers to calm ourselves and seek inner peace!

So, the people still had breath. The people still had hope. And YHWH was about to deliver in a way that they could have never anticipated. It wasn't just a messiah that was coming. It was the living God who was coming. All Creation had inhaled and was waiting to exhale with groaning labor pains. The teenager Mary had inhaled the Spirit of God and was waiting to exhale with groaning labor pains.

Their hope was about to be fulfilled in ways that they could never imagine—not in the form of a warrior king like David who would bring more violence but in the form of the Prince of Peace who would show them the pathway to peace—both within the self and outside in the world.

Spiro. Spero. I breathe. I hope.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 2--December 4, 2023

Back in my Young Adult Volunteer days the brilliant song leaders Jeff Moles and Matt Black taught us the following song to help us to calm storms within when we felt overwhelmed or anxious:

The peace of the earth be with you,

The peace of the heavens too;

The peace of the rivers be with you,

The peace of the oceans too.

Deep peace falling over you;

God's peace growing in you.

It was especially meaningful and helpful because it called us to reflect on the powerful peace that we can feel in Creation, even in the face of the raw power of nature. It served to remind us that the God who made everything with such raw power and exquisite beauty loves us with all that power and beauty. It reminded us that the earth, sky, rivers, and oceans experience times of tempests and upheaval and also times of unfathomably deep peace and calm. And so, we, also, could experience deep peace and calm. I sang that song too many times to count!

This past summer I had the blessing of again serving as chaplain for a week at Camp Pyoca in southern Indiana. During our chapel services outdoors in the pavilion I taught this song to the campers and had them identify aspects of nature that surrounded them and brought them peace at camp. We updated the song to include the deep peace of the lake, the trees, the trails, the flowers, etc. I pray that the campers found this as meaningful as I did!

As we explore inner peace this week, I encourage you to spend some time outside or to imagine your favorite natural spaces. Allow yourself to feel the deep peace of God's Creation. Remember that you, also, are part of God's Creation, created by God in God's own image and likeness.

In doing this exercise, let us also reflect on how people in conflict zones are unable to peacefully experience nature as God intended. Only imagination is possible. Let us do what we can to take action and advocate for a world in which all can truly experience the deep peace of the earth, heavens, rivers, and oceans! For, we can never feel truly at peace while others of God's children are suffering.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 3--December 5, 2023

As I contemplate inner peace, I am drawn to Mark chapter 6. I know that the chapter is detailing events that happened over a significant amount of time, but due to how we consume written material, the events are compressed. The chapter opens with Jesus being rejected in his hometown of Nazareth by the people who watched him grow up and have an intimate connection to his family. They should have been the ones most supportive of and open to his teachings. But instead he got this:

“On the Sabbath, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were surprised. ‘Where did this man get all this? What’s this wisdom he’s been given? What about the powerful acts accomplished through him? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t he Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?’ They were repulsed by him and fell into sin.”

Instead of support and openness from the village that raised him, he was met with scorn, disbelief, and judgement. Clearly this response hurt Jesus, as shown by his words, “Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households,” and then by his inability to do any miracles besides a few healings. Clearly he had hopes and plans to do more, but so impacted was he that his abilities were affected.

After that, he sent his disciples out two-by-two to share the good news of God’s love and enact healings. And so, he was alone.

Then we get the news that John the Baptist, Jesus’ beloved cousin brother, has been murdered by state execution. Their lives were intertwined from the beginning, and I know that Jesus’ grief would have been profound.

And then we have the feeding of the 5,000. This was a miraculous event, but the magnitude of it and the size of the crowd must have been overwhelming. So overwhelmed was he that he sent the disciples away on boats and dismissed the crowds so that he could go up onto a mountain to pray.

So, within the span of a few short paragraphs, we see Jesus profoundly hurt, alone, grieving, and overwhelmed. I can only imagine the storm that must have been raging inside! And his response? He went up a mountain to pray. He sought alone time with God and made it happen. I marvel at that time. I wonder if Jesus encountered God through meditation. I wonder if they had an audible conversation. I wonder what they discussed. I wonder if Jesus was able to express all that he was feeling. I wonder what solution or comfort God provided.

Whatever happened, Jesus came down the mountain refreshed and renewed. He walked on water and then calmed a storm that was raging around the disciples on their boat. And so he went from having a metaphorical storm raging within to being able to calm a physical storm outside.

This season may we be intentional about seeking out alone time with God and actually making it happen. May we communicate with God in whatever way works best for us—meditatively, conversationally, creatively. May we open ourselves up to God’s peace within us. As we do so, may we uplift in prayer those who are experiencing simultaneous profound hurt, loneliness, grief, and overwhelm in Gaza and Sudan.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)



Today I came across this piece of art entitled “Peace,” created by the renowned Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour in 2007. 2007 was the year that Hamas consolidated control of Gaza in a bloody fight with Fatah. It was also the year that Israel and Egypt imposed an indefinite blockade on Gaza, turning it into an open air prison and creating the conditions for the horrific deathtrap of today. More than 16,000 people have been killed in this death trap since October 7. More than 6,600 of those killed have been children. We are confronted with the horrors of this current slaughter because of the undeniable magnitude of the violence. The truth is that there has been untold suffering since 2007 because of the impacts of the blockade on access to food, water, medicine, and freedom of movement. The truth is that the current scale of death will multiply because of hunger, thirst, disease, and injury due to the blockade.

Sliman Mansour’s “Peace” is made of mud on wood. From a distance, the dove representing peace can be hard to discern upon the landscape of dry, cracked, blockaded earth. And yet, the dove of peace is indeed there in the dry, cracked, blockaded earth. I cannot begin to imagine the trauma and grief that the people of Gaza are experiencing right now, that they have been experiencing for so many years. I imagine that it is nearly impossible for them to feel any sense of inner peace, let alone to perceive of the possibility of a broader peace in the dry, cracked, blockaded earth.

Many of us are having a hard time feeling peace within ourselves simply from witnessing what is happening. And that is important. We should be disturbed beyond reason. We should be disturbed into action to create peace, to be sources of hope.

In its earthy brilliance, “Peace” calls us to ground ourselves. In therapy world, we use grounding exercises to access calm in the midst of fear and anxiety. These exercises entail getting into our senses—focusing on what we can see, hear, feel, smell, and taste—in order to get our anxious minds back into reality. As we attend to inner peace this Advent, we must ground ourselves in the reality of what is happening to those who are suffering the most in this world rather than burying our heads in the ground. And then, in doing something about it, we can begin to resolve the dissonance inside. We can begin to see the dove.

Advent, Day 5–December 7, 2023

The hymns of Advent are my favorite hymns. They tend to have a sonic and lyrical complexity, embodying the both/and nature of the season by carrying melancholic eeriness in their tunes and bright hope in their words. As I have been reflecting and trying my best to access inner peace, I have been particularly drawn to the hymn “Lo, How a Rose E’re Blooming.”

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As those of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.*

I find the image of a rose blooming on a still, crispy cold day to be an image that calls forth that peace—petals slowly unfurling with droplets of water upon them. Visualizing this process as I meditate brings a remarkable sense of calm to me, especially with that melancholic eeriness playing through my head. I invite you to center yourself and do this visualization with music. If you don’t know the song well enough for it to run through your head, there are plenty of options you can listen to. Let the words of the second verse tie that image of the unfurling rose to the unfurling of prophecy and the miracle of birth as the Christ child emerges.

*Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to us a Savior
When half-gone was the night.*

Now make it a multi-sensory visualization (SENSUALIZATION)! Smell the exquisite fragrance of a rose. Hear the first sounds of our savior experiencing life on earth.

*This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load!*

May the rose e’er bloom within us on this journey to inner peace!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 6--December 8, 2023

Many of us turn to psalms as our first impulse when opening our Bibles. Songs that we read as poetry, poetry we speak as prayer. We tend to have our favorite ones, the ones that come to the surface of our hearts in times of joy and times of need. Psalm 46 is one of those for me, and I would imagine I am not alone on this by any means!

I think of Psalm 46 as the poem of inner peace. It speaks of the peace that comes from seeking God in the stillness, even as turmoil and tempests rage on the outside. There is not much that I can say that it does not, but I invite you to read, reflect, and take a few moments to still your body, mind, and spirit. Take a few moments to listen. Take a few moments to know.

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

*Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*

*“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 7–December 9, 2023

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.” John 14:25-28

We started this week with breathing. Spero. Spiro. I hope. I breathe. Back to those language intricacies, “Spirit” has to be related to “Spiro.” Spirit and breath. This all gets even more exciting and exquisite when we look at our primary scriptural languages. “Pneuma” in Greek and “Ruach” in Hebrew are the words used for “Spirit”, and they both carry a spectrum of meaning including “Breath” and “Wind.”

In Jesus’ last discourse with his closest disciples, in the upper room before his betrayal and arrest, he spoke the words above. He reminded them that he would be leaving them, which surely activated all of their inner turmoil. Then he reminded them that the Holy Spirit would be joining them (by way of an inbreathing!). THEN he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Now I can’t help but wonder if Jesus meant that HIS peace IS the Holy Spirit.

As we do our breathing exercises and breath prayers, let’s focus on that inbreathing of the Holy Spirit (as we do every Sunday at FPCH). Let’s remember that the Spirit was gifted to us and thus is always there for us, with us, in us. And so let us experience the most profound peace that there is!

May this also inSPIRE us to do all that we can to advocate for the end of violence that kills, that takes breath away. For such is an attack on the very Spirit of God.

Will you join me in incorporating inner peace into creating peace with others as we keep expanding our circles of peace?

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 8–December 10, 2023

This week we expand our circle of peace to include interpersonal peace. As we keep expanding our circle, let us envision ripples of water from a stone's throw, with one leading to the next, leading to the next, and so on. For today's reflection, I share an excerpt from the sermon I preached this morning, entitled "Preparing the Way with Peace."

Our Hebrew Bible lesson and Gospel lesson today both speak of preparing the way of the Lord. From Isaiah: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" From Mark: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" And so, in so many ways, the season of Advent is the season in which we are called to prepare the way for Jesus. We are to imagine ourselves in the time of ancient Palestine preparing the way for the Christ child, and in the here and now we are to prepare the way for Christ to come back again. We are to be co-creators of a world that is ready for the Kingdom.

I can think of no better way to prepare the way for the Prince of Peace than to be weavers of peace. When it comes to interpersonal peace, we are not talking about an end to conflict. There will always be disagreements between people. Disagreement is part of the spice of life. We are all individuals with unique personalities and unique ways of understanding and engaging with the world. Indeed, conflict can lead to positive change as we

people authentically encounter each other in the fullness of who we are. Rather, interpersonal peace is all about seeking an end to violence as a response to or way of resolving conflict—

violent words, violent actions, violent policies, and violent systems.

At its heart, violence is rooted in fear. We seek to harm each other with words, actions, policies, and systems because of our many fears. We fear losing power. We fear losing property. We fear losing wealth. We fear losing status. We fear being wrong. We fear becoming irrelevant. Our economics, and thus our societies, are built upon the myth of scarcity—the myth that there is not enough in this world to meet everyone's needs. And so we jealously accumulate and defend things like power, property, wealth, status, and our sense of being right.

And then we are taught to fear losing these things because then we will somehow be lacking or less-than. I say that we are taught to fear because we are constantly bombarded with messages of fear. We are told to fear women's empowerment because it leads to a weakening of masculinity. We are told to fear gentle parenting because it leads to disrespect. We are told to fear other religions because they encourage different ways of understanding and living life. We are told to fear people seeking safety because they are invaders trying to take over our country. All of this, of course, is bollocks! But those messages have a lot of violent power.

And so heads of household enact violence against spouses and children out of fear of losing power or status in the household. Men enact violence against women out of fear of being thought of as weak or not masculine enough. Citizens enact violence against immigrants out of fear of losing their majority status and some mythological way of life. Religious majorities enact violence against religious minorities out of fear of losing power and influence in how society functions.

In the wise words of Jedi master Yoda, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." We are taught to hate those whom we fear. It is good reason that so many words to describe hatred are actually words with fear at their root—xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia.

And then we get to guns in this week when the USA surpassed its previous record of mass shootings per year, in this week when there was yet another college campus shooting. When people feel like they have lost power, guns make them feel powerful again, for they give the power to take life with ease. Then the more guns there are, the more people actually fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The more people fear, the more likely they are to get their own weapons and use them. It is a vicious cycle that spirals towards death.

Even when we do not use physical weapons in interpersonal conflict, we still contribute to this spiral of death when we cause harm with words and policies and systems. In our fear of losing power, property, wealth, status, and our sense of being right, we say things that dehumanize others and thus make them more dispensable in our minds. We support policies that maintain homelessness, put people into prisons, force people to make perilous journeys and then face detention and deportation, and make people to feel like they are somehow lacking or less-than in their personhood. We participate in systems that segregate cities and entrench poverty and mandate exploitative labor. And so we create powerlessness that leads to further desperation that leads to further violence, perpetuating those same vicious cycles and death spirals. UFFF!

You know who had a bone to pick with these vicious cycles and death spirals? The one who was prophesied as the voice who would cry out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" John the Baptist, whose life was so intimately and intricately tied to the life of his cousin brother, Jesus the Christ, made it his mission to get people to repent and make right exactly the violence we are discussing. As part of his repentance he demanded changes in behaviors. And he was an equal opportunity rebuker. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers and warned them that it was their actions that mattered, not their power or status.

He warned the rich that they must give their clothing and food to the poor. He warned the tax collectors that they must be fair and honest, collecting only what was owed. He warned the soldiers that they must stop

intimidating people with violence. Nobody would ever accuse John the Baptist of avoiding or trying to end conflict! He ran straight into conflict as he sought to make straight the path for the Lord. But we can certainly identify John the Baptist as a weaver of peace, for he sought an end to violence as a response to and way of resolving conflict.

And then Jesus walked along the highway in the desert that John prepared, showing and teaching a way that dug out the very root of violence—fear. 1 John teaches us that the opposite of fear is love. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” Jesus was the very embodiment of love—Love made flesh. And he flipped the entire paradigm of violence on its head by calling upon love.

You see, we call those whom we fear and hate “enemies.” In doing so, we justify enacting violence against them with our words, actions, policies, and systems. And what did Jesus have to say about enemies? “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

...Whenever we feel hatred or anger or fear, we must do the hard work of pausing before reacting and transforming our view, of seeing the other as someone under the same sun and the same rain, as someone created by the same God in the same image and likeness of love. There is no fear in love. And so there is no violence in love. This is how we achieve interpersonal peace. This is how we prepare the way for the Prince of Peace. With love. Amen.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 9—December 11, 2023

Yesterday we lit the candle for peace. As we did so we called upon the one whom we call the Prince of Peace. Peace has been and will continue to be our theme throughout Advent, but this week it is more intentionally our guiding light—this week after the U.S. set a grisly new record for mass shootings, this week as the Masalit people in Sudan continue to be massacred, this week as the number of people killed in Gaza surpasses 18,000 with the majority women and children, this week as starvation sets in in Gaza. Peace must be our guiding light! And so we turn to Isaiah, the prophet of the Prince of Peace:

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”—Isaiah 9:2-6

Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. We often read these titles in the last verse and think about how lovely they are, but I wonder how often we truly reflect on what they mean. For, they are given to us within a context. In order for the people in darkness to see the great shining light of the Prince of Peace, in order for all of that exultant joy to pour forth, there first has to be an end to oppression—“For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken.” And then, as a response to the light of the Prince of Peace, there also must be an end to militarism—“For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.”

Oppression is the systemic violence that dispossesses people of structural power and freedom. Palestinians live under the oppression of the Israeli occupation. Masalits live under the oppression of the Sudanese Arab majority. People of color in the United States live under the oppression of white supremacy. Those are just a few examples of racial oppression in the world, and there are countless other oppressions and intersections of oppression based on gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, age, income level, and citizenship status. In order to respond faithfully to the Prince of Peace who was born as the Christ child and in order to prepare the way for the Prince of Peace to come again, we must seek to end oppression! We must break the yoke of burden that weighs down people’s lives. We must break the rods, the weapons that punish people for seeking liberation. For, while there is oppression in this world, there cannot truly be peace. AND we must seek an end to militarism and war! Militarism is the consolidation and codification of oppression through force and violence, and war is the ugly, inevitable result of militarism.

Now, you may ask how we can do such massive things as ending oppression, militarism, and war. We can do this at the micro-level by gaining deeper awareness of our own identities and how they play a role in oppression and then by checking that oppression in daily interactions. We can do this at the macro-level by advocating and agitating for the abolition of oppressive policies and structures and weapons. Individual actions do indeed matter, and we also must join together as a Kingdom of action under the leadership of the Prince of Peace. There is an incredible number of peace weavers in this world! Imagine our power if we seek each other out and act together. Let us envision and then create a day when our exultation will be multiplied and our joy increased because of the light of true peace!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 10–December 12, 2023

The Prince of Peace came to us through a mother, nurtured and loved (and nurtured by love!) in the womb of Mary. In her love, I am certain that she worried about him then, and I am certain that she worried about him every day of his life. She did so as most mothers do for their children, but I am sure she did so with much more acuity because of the dangers she knew her child would face simply because of who he was, where he was. Palestinian mothers know this acuity of worry well. Black and Brown mothers in the United States know this acuity of worry well. And, more and more, all mothers in the United States know this acuity of worry well when their children go to school or to the mall or to houses of worship or simply outside. This poem by Eloísa Pérez-Lozano is a powerful and painful piece about that particular acuity of worry. I invite you to read it and to let it touch you and so to let it inspire you to act.

HIDING YOU UNDER ME

By Eloísa Pérez-Lozano

I want to shrink you down,
tuck you between my breasts and rib cage,
settle you into the valleys between bones,
held in place by my supple underness,
never explored.

I want to protect you from madmen
in schools, concerts, and churches
angry at the cards they were dealt
that they didn't know how to play.

But I know I would miss seeing you
so inside the innocence of home, I would
cup myself, dropping you into my
waiting palm, your minuscule smile
shining up at me.

I don't want you to know the metallic smell of
warm blood rushing, gushing from your body
friends or strangers trying to stop the flow
as you leave this life without me.

It might get hot from time to time,
but you could prop me up like a tent,
feel the breeze through my blouse,
poke my fleshy ceiling, I'd fan away the heat
before hiding you again.

I want to keep you safe within my sacred space
and if someday it's our turn to face the rage
I will shield you with my softness from the
crimson coming down around you.

My heartbeat would again become
the soundtrack to your existence
a constant presence pulsing.
Thrumming vibrations that soothe your soul
the cadence of care.

My pulse will slow its pace
leaving you unharmed, alone
its unending echoes still alive
in the memories of your mind.

My lifeless flesh will hold you
till you're found by those who know
where to look for children
enfolded in maternal embrace.

As we contemplate interpersonal peace this week, let us reflect on what our violence does to children. Let us reflect on what our violence does to mothers. As we advocate and act for change, let us see the face and thus the potential of Jesus in every child. Let us witness the love and worry of Mary in every mother. Let us feel the unmatched power of the maternal embrace. Let us honor the maternal embrace by seeking peace. In Gaza. In the USA.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 11--December 13, 2023



The Knotted Gun, the iconic bronze sculpture by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd that sits right outside the headquarters of the United Nations, was originally created to memorialize John Lennon after he was shot and killed by someone who disagreed with the messages of some of his later songs. I was struck by this sculpture the very first time I went to New York City, and it often emerges in my mind when I think about the violence perpetrated in this world and our need to end it. The imagery is simple, stark, and powerful. Guns are the clearest representation of violence and certainly the most potent symbol and deadly embodiment of violence in this country. They may not be the most lethal weapons of warfare, but they are the weapons of interpersonal violence in war, for the individual shooter has to look at the victim. Their lethality combined with that interpersonal nature makes them an apt symbol for the worst that is within us humans.

I learned today that The Knotted Gun is officially called “Non-Violence.” That is a fitting name. For, if the gun is the ultimate symbol of violence then the incapacitation of the gun is a representation of non-violence. Perhaps we could even see it as the beginning process of the transformation of weapons into useful tools, of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. I can picture that metal being heated and twisted up further and forged into something new! “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”—Isaiah 2:4

“Non-Violence” sits outside the building where the U.S. recently vetoed a demand for a ceasefire in Gaza in the security council and then voted against the same demand in the general assembly. Instead of twisting violence to incapacitation, we twisted our moral compass to incapacitation. And so we are complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands. The same is true for how we treat guns and gun violence in this country. Instead of demanding a ceasefire by getting guns out of markets and out of people’s hands, we keep proliferating markets and homes with more. And so we are regularly complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands.

As we seek to prepare the way for the Prince of Peace, we must seek inner peace and interpersonal peace. We must exorcise the worst of violence within ourselves, and we must be willing to exorcise the worst of violence between each other. We must be willing to exorcise the weapons.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 12—December 14, 2023

This week’s Advent hymn is one of the more upbeat songs of the season...and one of the best! “Comfort, Comfort Ye My People” is a musical rendering of the already poetic, prophetic words of Isaiah 40: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

Now, to the song:

Comfort, comfort ye my people,
speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
comfort those who sit in darkness
mourning 'neath their sorrow's load.
Speak ye to Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them!
Tell her that her sins I cover,
and her warfare now is over.

This hymn is not a direct copy and paste of the scripture, but I pray that it is prophetic nonetheless! Isaiah was prophesying about a peace that would come with the end of the exile in Babylon. This context also cannot be copied and pasted onto today’s realities, but there is unquestionable resonance with the occupation, displacement, and violence that is happening in Palestine. There is resonance in the lives of Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression. There is resonance in the lives of Afghans and Iraqis whose lives and thriving have been forever disrupted by the USA’s wars. There is resonance in the lives of the many thousands of migrants across the world, at the border, and in our cities who are seeking safety, shelter, and thriving. God does and will forgive, but there must be repentance. There must be acknowledgment of the truth of what is happening. There must be a turning away from violence and a turning back towards God. There must be a transformation of behavior and a transformation of hearts. Then there can be ever-springing gladness! Back to the song:

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,
blotting out each dark misdeed;
all that well deserved His anger
He will no more see nor heed.
She hath suffered many a day,
now her griefs have passed away;
God will change her pining sadness
into ever-springing gladness.

For Elijah's voice is crying
in the desert far and near,
bidding all to repentance,
since the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey,
now prepare for God a way;
let the valleys rise to meet Him,
and the hills bow down to greet Him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,
make the rougher places plain,
let your hearts be true and humble,
as befits His holy reign;
for the glory of the LORD
now o'er earth is shed abroad,
and all flesh shall see the token
that His Word is never broken.

How can we prepare for God a way? How can we join the valleys and hills in meeting and greeting God? How can we make straight what long was crooked?

By speaking peace! Let us join our voices with the many thousands and cry, "Peace!" Let us repent individually and thus weave peace within ourselves. Let us repent collectively and thus change the way of violence. Let us repent globally and thus prepare the way of the LORD!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 13--December 15, 2023



I had the privilege of gazing upon the "Armored Dove of Peace" in 2016 when I visited Bethlehem. It is thought to be one of Banksy's paintings. It is another one of those images that has seared itself into my mind and memory for good. I think about it often. It graces the approximately 26-foot high wall that separates Bethlehem from Israeli settlements. I think about it so often because it is such a powerful image in such a meaningful place.

Bethlehem, the place of Jesus's birth, is a stunningly beautiful town! I will never forget the rocky landscape, the Shepherds' Field, the Church of the Nativity, the lights at night, and some of the warmest hospitality to be found anywhere on this earth. I will also never forget the wall. It is this ugly thing of violent occupation, a barrier that would have blocked Mary and Joseph from ever reaching the little town of Bethlehem had it been there back in the day. It is also a canvas for brilliant artwork, with protest artists and peace-painters making it clear that beauty is still possible in the midst of the ugly violence.

The Armored Dove of Peace evokes the story of Noah's Ark, with the dove bringing back the branch to show the end of the fury of the flood. It evokes the dove descending upon Jesus at baptism, as God claimed him. In both cases, the dove is the fulfillment of God's promise of peace. Then there is the armor and the target. The symbolism is quite clear. The brutal militarism of the occupation means that even the dove of peace is in the crosshairs.

The story of the nativity, the story we look forward to so eagerly during Advent, is one of promise and potential. It is the story of a poor family under imperial occupation transforming the world against all odds. It is the story of the hope that exists in all children. It is the story of the Prince of Peace coming to bless the world with a new way of doing life. It is the story of the joy of life when death is ever present. It is the story of a mother's love. It is the story that should give us all reason to seek an end to violence so that other sacred children of God can fulfill their promise and potential and experience hope, peace, joy, and love.

May we strive for a world in which the dove can fly off of that wall and shed its armor!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 14--December 16, 2023

This week's Psalm is Psalm 85. It is a prayer for peace that is thought to have been sung by the children of Korah, a family known for their singers. The first half lifts up God's mercy and forgiveness and points to a need for the people to be at peace with God. During this week's Bring Your Own Bible discussion at First Presbyterian Church of Highland, one of our faithful scholars pointed out that repentance is integral to inner peace. When we recognize and take responsibility for harm that we have caused, do whatever is necessary to make things right, and turn back to God, we do much to calm turmoil within ourselves. This is true in our relationships with others, and this is true in our relationship with God. And so repentance also helps in weaving peace with others and in weaving peace with God. Verses 1-7 allude to a repairing of relationship with God, and so repentance must have happened or must have been in progress. And there shall be joy on this journey of reparation!

Lord, you've been kind to your land;
you've changed Jacob's circumstances for the better.
You've forgiven your people's wrongdoing;
you've covered all their sins. Selah
You've stopped being furious;
you've turned away from your burning anger.
You, the God who can save us, restore us!
Stop being angry with us!
Will you be mad at us forever?
Will you prolong your anger from one generation to the next?
Won't you bring us back to life again
so that your people can rejoice in you?
Show us your faithful love, Lord!
Give us your salvation!

And then the prayer for peace becomes clear in verses 8-9. We again hear about speaking peace. I can only imagine the power of God's spoken word! And God says, "Peace! Do not return to your harmful ways!" In other words, let your repentance be true and lasting. Remain turned toward God and God's way of Love.

Let me hear what the Lord God says,
because he speaks peace to his people and to his faithful ones.
Don't let them return to foolish ways.
God's salvation is very close to those who honor him
so that his glory can live in our land.

And here in the remainder of the psalm we get to the most beautiful part of this poetic prayer, the part where righteousness and peace kiss! You don't get much more intimate than that! It speaks of the profound connection between peace and the rightness of our actions. In order for there to be peace, we must be active in the struggle for justice in this world. We must weave peace with our actions to make things right for those who are suffering most.

Faithful love and truth have met;
righteousness and peace have kissed.
Truth springs up from the ground;
righteousness gazes down from heaven.
Yes, the Lord gives what is good,
and our land yields its produce.
Righteousness walks before God,
making a road for his steps.

There is that image of preparing the way again! We started this week with Isaiah's and John the Baptist's calls to prepare the way of the Lord. How do we make the road for God's steps? We do so by blazing the trail with righteousness, and thus with active peace. May that kiss of righteousness and peace be full and passionate!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 15—December 17, 2023

Happy Gaudete Sunday, everyone! Today we are called to rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say, "Rejoice!" There are few songs that evoke my joy more than "The Canticle of the Turning." It has been one of my favorite songs since 2009, when aforementioned YAV musicians extraordinaire taught it to us as one of our sending songs. It sang out to our passionate, justice-hungry souls with its powerful words and tune that makes you want to belt it out at the top of your lungs.

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
That the God of my heart is great
And my spirit sings of the Wondrous things
That you bring to the ones who wait
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight
And my weakness you did not spurn
So from east to west shall my name be blest
Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn!
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

It took me a long time to learn that this song is an adaptation of the greatest song ever sung, Mary's Magnificat. She sang with the tune of Hannah, mother of Samuel, who would usher in the first Israelite kingdom long ago. She sang with the tune of the great prophets who predicted the coming Messiah. She sang with the tune of the radicals and zealots who sought an end to oppression and injustice. She sang with the tune of the chroniclers of history who maintained the genealogies of old and tracked the fulfillment of God's covenant. Imagine if the Sadducees and Pharisees and Scribes and teacher of the law had heard that coming out of the mouth of this pregnant teenager! Imagine if the Herods and the Pilates and the Caesars had heard that coming out of the mouth of this Palestinian Jew from Nazareth!

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Hallelujah! She sang these words to Elizabeth who carried the prophet of the Way. She sang these words to John, who would carry the mantle of Elijah. She sang these words to Jesus, who would carry the full weight of God and the full weight of humanity in his very identity. These three were her audience. And together, the four of them—two mothers and two sons—would see to it that her prophecy would be fulfilled. For, her prophecy had to be fulfilled. For, it was the prophecy of the enactment of love, the prophecy of the incarnation of the God who is love—the God who chose to enter the world through somebody who had none of the power society had to offer, through somebody who had all the power of mind, spirit, and body to shake the world to its foundations.

"The Canticle of the Turning" continues:

Though I am small, my God, my all, you
Work great things in me
And your mercy will last from the Depths
Of the past to the end of the age to be
Your very name puts the proud to shame
And to those who would for you yearn
You will show your might
Put the strong to flight
For the world is about to turn
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn!
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

From the halls of power to the fortress tower
Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your
Justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more
For the food they can never earn
There are tables spread, ev'ry
Mouth be fed
For the world is about to turn
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn!
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

Though the nations rage from age to age
We remember
Who holds us fast
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp
This saving word that out forebears
Heard is the promise which holds us bound
'Til the spear and rod can be
Crushed by God

Who is turning the world around
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn!
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

May we sing like Mary in this final week of Advent! May we prophesy about peace that comes with justice for the oppressed! May we do all that we can to make that prophecy come to fruition! And may we do so with JOY!

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 16—December 18, 2023

Yesterday we read the prophetic poetry of Mary as she prepared herself and the world for the messiah whom she would birth, nurture, raise, teach, guide, and love. Just as we need the prophetic poetry of our scriptures, we need the prophetic poetry of today's prophets. As we seek peace in our world this week, it is especially important that we listen to the voices of those who are most impacted by the violence, who understand better than anyone the need for peace. Emtithal Mahmoud is the 2015 World Poetry Slam Champion and 2016 Woman of the World Co-Champion. She is originally from the Darfur region of Sudan and has lived through genocide, war, displacement, and being a refugee. She knows all too well what the people of Darfur have experienced once again in 2023 and what the people of Gaza are experiencing now. I recommend that you look her up and witness her gift of slam poetry. Here is one of her poems, entitled "Head Over Heels." Before reading, please center yourselves, breathe, and seek some inner peace. It is hard to learn about violence, but it is necessary for us to witness in order to seek change.

"Head Over Heels"

By Emtithal Mahmoud

They hand me the microphone as my shoulder sinks under the weight of this dress; The woman says,
The one millionth refugee just left South Sudan, can you comment?

I feel my feet rock back and
forth on the heels my mother
bought Begging the question,
do we stay, or is it safer to choose flight?

My mind echoes through the numbers:
One million gone, 400,000 dead in
Darfur,
two million displaced
and this lump takes over my throat as if each of those bodies found a grave right here in
my esophagus.

Our once country—
all west, and south, and east, and
north— so restless, the Nile couldn't hold us
together and you ask me to summarize?

They talk about the numbers as if this isn't still happening,
As if 500,000 didn't just die in Syria,
as if 3,000 aren't still making their final stand

at the bottom of the Mediterranean,
as if there aren't entire volumes full of factsheets about our genocide and now you want me to write one?

Fact: we never talked over breakfast because
the warplanes would swallow our
voices.

Fact: my grandfather didn't want to leave home
so he died in a warzone.

Fact: a burning bush without God is just a fire.

I measure the distance between what I know and what is safe to say on a
microphone. Do I talk about sorrow, displacement?
Do I mention the violence?

How it's never as simple as what we see on TV?
How there are weeks' worth of fear before the camera is on?

Do I talk about our bodies? How they are 60 percent water, but we still burn like driftwood?
Do I tell her the men died first? Mothers forced to watch the slaughter?
That they came for our children?
Scattering them across the continent
until our homes sank, that even castles sink at the bite of the bomb?

Do I mention the elderly? Our heroes—
too weak to run too expensive to shoot?
How they would march them hands raised, rifles at their backs into the fire?
How their walking sticks kept the flames alive?

It sounds too harsh for a bundle of wires and an audience to swallow; too relentless,
like the valley that filled with the putrid smoke of our deaths.
Is it better in verse? Can a stanza become a burial shroud?

Will it sting less if I say it softly?
Will the pain leave when the microphone does?
If you don't see me cry will you listen better?
30 seconds for the sound bite and now 3 minutes for the poem. Why does every word feel like
I'm saying my last?

My tongue goes dry, the same way we died—
becoming ash without ever having been coal.
I feel my left leg go numb and realize that I locked my knees,
bracing for impact.

I never wear shoes I can't run in.

As we continue our journey through Advent, let us keep listening to the prophets—especially the women! Let us be
witnesses, and let us take action for transformation. Let us be weavers of peace.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)



This painting done by Heba Zagout in 2021 is entitled “Gaza Peace.” Heba Zagout was born in the Al Burejj refugee camp in Gaza. Her family was originally from the village of Isdud, now Ashdod, and had to flee as refugees due to forcible expulsion from their land. The painting shows the complex reality of Gaza—densely packed with homes, markets, mosques, and churches. You can see minarets and steeples jutting into the sky. The sea is in the foreground, with high waves perhaps symbolizing the stormy reality of life under an international blockade—a blockade that meant many years without independent access to fresh water, food, and medical supplies, let alone non-essentials that have become part of the fabric of many of our lives. The sky is red, symbolizing the bloody reality of many years of bombs and bullets.

And then there are the doves, the most prominent feature of this stunning piece of art. As is so often the case in the imagery of sacred scriptures and art, the doves are the sign of peace. A few days ago we saw the dove in Bethlehem with the target on it. Here, we see doves flying freely, gracing the city with the possibility of peace. If the doves fly freely in peace, perhaps someday the people can move freely in peace. Perhaps someday the people can thrive in peace.

In 2021 this peace had to be imagined and prophesied in art, for it was certainly not lived reality under the blockade that turned Gaza into what many people called the largest open-air prison on earth. In 2023 the landscape is one of rubble rather than one of people’s houses and houses of worship filled with life. Heba Zagout was known for paintings of what that life looked like. She was Instagram famous for pieces that she did showing herself and her children in the chaos of life at home under Covid quarantine, replete with rolls of toilet paper flying through the air. She showed the hectic joy of the human spirit that thrives everywhere on this planet, even in the places where suffering is immense. I highly recommend that you check out her other work!

Heba Zagout and two of her children were killed by an airstrike on October 13, 2023, victims of horrific, indiscriminate attacks by the Israeli military following Hamas’ horrific, indiscriminate attack on kibbutzim and festival goers near Gaza’s border. She was a mother, a teacher, an artist, a joy-filled lover of peace. We should grieve her and every blessed child of God whose life has been taken in the violence that plagues this world.

The sky has been red with bloody bombing for over two months now. As she painted so stunningly, though, the doves of peace can still fly in a red sky. The doves of peace have more power than fighter jets. As we get ever closer to welcoming the Prince of Peace, we must strive for a world in which the doves can freely fly, in which people can freely move in peace—a world that includes Gaza. We must use our creative gifts to prophesy peace. We must use our collective power to create peace.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 18—December 20, 2023

The prophet Isaiah calls out to us throughout Advent, urging us to trust in God's promise, to prepare the way of the LORD, and to expect the messiah. He is consistent in naming and shaming injustice, demanding that we dismantle injustice and turn back to God, and prophesying about a future in which there will be peace on earth—that is peace with each other and peace with God. We Christians see Jesus as fulfilling that role of the expected messiah. We thus see Jesus as embodying the words of Isaiah 61. Isaiah himself was speaking to the Israelites long before the birth of Jesus. Whichever lens we read these words through—as accomplished through a messiah who has come, as a contextually specific message for the ancient Israelites in exile, or as something to look forward to with a messiah who is still to come—they carry magnificent resonance again today.

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.”—Isaiah 61:1-4

This is a message of peace on multiple levels. It proclaims true peace—the peace that only comes with liberation of the oppressed. It inspires a sense of peace for those who are in captivity and those whose loved ones are in captivity, as it gives hope that freedom is possible. It engenders inner peace in comforting those who mourn. It catalyzes peace within for all by lifting up hope—hope that the ruins of war will be built up again, that life will return. This is certainly a message needed by so many in the world right now, especially for those in the lands most familiar to Isaiah and Jesus—those whose lives and livelihoods, families and homes are being snuffed out by indiscriminate bombing and those being held captive in Israeli prisons and in Hamas' locations.

The promise of Advent is the promise that God cares enough about this world and about us inhabitants of this world to intervene and save us. Clearly we are still causing great harm, but we have been shown the way to make things right. We are to take up the mantle of Isaiah and the mantle of Jesus. We are to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and enact liberation. We are to be the incarnation today.

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my whole being shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”—Isaiah 61:10

As we wait with expectant joy this season, let us do what we can to ensure that joy is no longer snuffed out by violence.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 19—December 21, 2023

“Said the king to the people everywhere
Listen to what I say! (Listen to what I say!)
Pray for peace, people, everywhere
Listen to what I say! (Listen to what I say!)
The Child, the Child sleeping in the night
He will bring us goodness and light
He will bring us goodness and light!”

So ends “Do You Hear What I Hear?”, written by Noël Regney and by Gloria Shayne in 1962. They were asked to write a Christmas song but were wary of doing so because of the capitalist commercialization of the sacred holiday. And so they sought to create something that would point people back to that sacred truth. At the time there was a lot of fear and anxiety because of the evil of nuclear weapons, an evil that has only grown over the years even though we talk about it less. In the face of such evil, such potential for planetary destruction, they turned to praying for peace.

In the face of violence, we often hear people who have the power to make change but choose not to do anything offering up thoughts and prayers. We should definitely call this out as meaningless when there is no action behind it, when it is an empty sentiment simply meant to make the speaker feel better. As we healthily criticize empty sentiment, though, we should not disregard the power of prayer when it is done with thoughtful intention.

For, there is certainly power in prayer! When we choose to reach out to God, we choose to seek the intervention of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. When we focus our hearts and minds on the divine, we encounter the power of the cosmos. There is transformation in that encounter! We may attain greater clarity on whatever the situation is. We may receive inspiration for what we can do about it. We may experience peace within ourselves. Our spirit may join others’ spirits, may join the Holy Spirit in softening hearts and changing actions. Our collective prayers may reach people who are suffering and bring hope and comfort and peace. Oh yes, there is power in prayer!

There is so much violence in the world right now, and we absolutely should be active in the struggle to end it. We should be using the gifts of our bodies, minds, and imaginations to weave peace. We should also be using the gifts of our spirits to pray for peace, people everywhere! When done with intent rather sentiment, they truly matter. As we get ever closer to Christmas day, let us take time to pray. In those prayers, let us name people, communities, and situations in need of peace. Let us envision our spirits reaching out to join others' spirits to join the Holy Spirit in causing change.

[#CeaseFireNow](#)

Advent, Day 20—December 22, 2023



First Presbyterian Church of Highland is blessed to have neighbors who put on some of the best Christmas light shows I have seen anywhere. Throughout Advent and Christmas it takes just a little bit longer to get to the church building because other drivers are slow-rolling their way along the streets to enjoy the brilliant displays at houses and in the parks. My favorite display every year is a few blocks away, along the powerline walking path that leads back to Highland's Heron Rookery.

“PEACE ON EARTH” is another one of those phrases like “Thoughts and Prayers” that risks ringing hollow due to over-use or disconnected platitude-ness. I deeply appreciate how big and bold this Christmas light statement is, though! For, in truth to call for peace on earth is radically countercultural in our world today. Violence is big business, and big business runs our governments and societies. The production and sale of weapons drives economies and international policies. War is grotesque media entertainment, drawing us in as viewers and cheerleaders without attention to the reality of life being destroyed. Movies, shows, music, books, and games feed us violence, and we enjoy it. We have become so desensitized!

To cry out for PEACE ON EARTH, then, is to cry out for a total disruption of what makes the world run today. It is to evoke a different possibility, a different priority, a different purpose. It is to choose life over death. It is to listen to the cries of those who suffer the most because of our wars and weapons. In other words, it is to be re-sensitized. It is to feel again, to empathize, to join in solidarity.

There are many who would say that PEACE ON EARTH is a pipe dream. They would have us believe that our current system of power and control, of enforced “order,” of hegemony through might is the way that the world must run. Clearly, they are wrong! Look at the world today! The Prince of Peace would have us believe in a very different possibility—that of loving enemies, of turning weapons into tools that plant and harvest grains, of lions lying down with lambs, of open tables and open temples, of strength through vulnerability, of mercy and grace and LOVE.

PEACE ON EARTH is possible! Indeed, we are called to make it happen! So let us proclaim it with brilliant boldness. Let us disrupt these violent systems. Let us feel again. Let us put our hearts and minds and spirits and bodies into it. Let us use our imaginations. Let us use our gifts. Let us join each other. Let us make it happen!

Advent, Day 21—December 23, 2023



Throughout Advent we have been expanding our circles of peace, starting within and moving farther and farther beyond ourselves. We have viewed peace through the lenses of justice and liberation for the oppressed. We have challenged violent systems, violent structures, and violent policies. We have called for an end to wars and weapons. We have sought to love our enemies as neighbors and thus as ourselves. We have been inspired by art and poetry and music of resistance, of grief, of hope. We have prayed with intention, and hopefully we have acted upon those same intentions. We have done all of this is an evocation and incarnation of the Prince of Peace, upon whom we wait this season. We are almost there! Somehow Christmas Even is already tomorrow! If your brain and spirit are like mine, which I have a hunch is true for a lot of you, then you have had the words and tune of “Let There Be Peace on Earth” running through your head over the past three weeks.

*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me;
let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.
With God our creator, children all are we.
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.*

*Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.
With every step I take, may this be my solemn vow:
To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*

This classic is especially relevant to our concept of expanding circles of peace, for it gets at the truth that peace is all interconnected—our individual peace depends on our neighbors' peace depends on the world's peace, and the world's peace goes all the way back to depending on our individual peace. And so, peace on earth begins with me!

We often think too small about our ability to impact the world. We get self-conscious, assuming that there is nothing we can do. We consider our contributions to be minimal and ineffective. I get it! There is a great big world out there with great big problems! And yet, the Prince of Peace taught us that if we have but the faith of a mustard seed we can move mountains. The Prince of Peace received bread from a little boy and fed thousands. The Prince of Peace lifted up the widows mite as the mightiest contribution to behold.

We must never use our smallness in the world as an excuse to be inert and inactive. There is always something we can do. Everywhere on this blessed earth there are people in need of liberation and love. That might look like waves and smiles. That might look like forgiveness and mercy. That might look like visitation and conversation. That might look like protest and advocacy. That might look like offering ourselves to a cause. That might look like making something beautiful and sharing it with others. That might look like giving out our abundance of resources. That might look like simply acknowledging fellow human dignity. All these things can and should be done anywhere. All these things are necessary for there to be peace on earth!

Here is a beautiful example. Around Thanksgiving time, my family partnered with the saints of First Presbyterian Church of Shelbyville, IN, to put together blessing bags full of warm clothes and goodies to be shared with people in need. My understanding is that some of the items were lovingly knitted and crocheted by hand. I ended up with around ten bags and lots of socks to boot. The saints of First Presbyterian Church of Highland, IN, then augmented the joy with handmade stuffed animals and scrunchies as well as some coats. I have been handing them out in Chicago bit by bit over the past few weeks.

Today Vima and I decided to venture out for some last minute shopping, and we were struck by a tale of three cities. In the shopping areas, we were in snaking lines of people crammed narrowly between shelf after shelf of material items, and I know there is a nearly endless supply of those material items that will keep refilling the shelves. While we were out we also decided to visit some spaces to hand out the remaining blessing bags. We made our way to an encampment under the expressway overpass near my neighborhood, where several folks who experience chronic houselessness in the city have made tent homes. We gave away a few bags and blankets. We then headed to one of the new and already infamous shelters for newly arrived migrants, where thousands of people (including many children) are now staying. When we got out of the car to share the rest of what we had, the circle of people around us kept expanding. We did not have nearly enough, but the fact that we had something to give away in the first place is testament to so many of you letting peace on earth begin with you! Thank you!

During our Christmas Eve journey, we also took a drive by the big Christmas tree in Millennium Park, a picture of which is gracing this post. It struck me that folks from all three of these cities were surely gathered there to feel a bit of the joy and peace of this season. And that's the truth of it! We are all always in the same community. To actually BE a community, though, we have to truly embody love and liberation for each other. We have to weave peace with each other. And where should that start? Let it begin with me! And you!

Advent, Day 22—December 24, 2023

Merry Christmas Eve, everyone! What a blessing it has been to weave this tapestry of peace together with all of you over these three weeks of Advent! The image that you see is the tapestry that the peace weavers of First Presbyterian Church of Highland have been creating throughout the season. If you have been participating from afar, never fear! Your spirits of peace have been woven in through the workings of the Holy Spirit! As you have read and participated, I pray that you have experienced peace within, encountered peace with others, and striven for peace in the world! I pray that you will continue to do so forevermore! For our final 2023 reflection, I share my message from our Christmas Eve candlelight service, entitled “Peace on Earth.” If some of it feels familiar, that is because it has become our tradition to marvel at the magnitude of Creation as we celebrate the Incarnation.

“Peace on Earth”

Let’s breathe, everyone! God of peace, give us peace. God of peace, give us peace. God of peace, give us peace. Throughout Advent we have been expanding our circles of peace. We have sought inner peace by welcoming the Prince of Peace into our hearts to calm the storms within. With inner peace as our starting point, we have sought to weave peace with others—preparing the way for the Prince of Peace not by avoiding conflict but by choosing to see others through the lens of love rather than through the lens of fear. Considering interpersonal peace more broadly, we have sought peace in the world by picking up the prophetic, poetic mantle of Mary who sang the truth that there must be liberation of the oppressed. And now, on this holy night, this peace-filled night, we get to experience God’s peace in the most profoundly powerful of ways—by joining each other in community and encountering the mystery of the Incarnation. For, God forever made peace with us, forever made peace on earth, by becoming one of us!

A couple of weeks ago a wonderful intergenerational group of faithful FPCHers had the joy of bringing joy to some of our blessed elders with song. One of our favorite songs to sing was *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*.

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled.”
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic hosts proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem.”

Peace on earth, and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled. God made peace on earth and reconciled with us through Christ who was born in Bethlehem. As you listen to the story of the Incarnation, I invite you gaze upon the circle of peace that we have woven with our prayers throughout Advent. Consider the truth that all of God’s creatures, all of God’s children, all of us are woven together in the exquisitely beautiful tapestry of Creation.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was beautiful; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was beautiful. Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was beautiful. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was beautiful. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was beautiful. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was beautiful.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in God’s own image. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude” (Genesis 1:1-2:1).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known” (John 1:1-18).

That, my friends, is how it happened! The God who made the universes, the galaxies, the stars, the planets, the moons, the biospheres, and the ecosystems—the great God of all the cosmos. This very God was born in a manger in a cave in a little town of Bethlehem, where there was no room in the inn. The God who set all these things into motion with perfect algorithms, physics, and metaphysics we are still just barely scratching the surface of understanding. This very God was born to the poor, Jewish, teenager Mary whom we honored on Sunday.

The God who dwells in eternity, who was and is and is to come. This very God was born in a colonized land to a subjugated people at the time of one of the most powerful, violent empires the world has ever known.

The author of life, the creator of everything, was born in the most humble of ways to the most oppressed of human beings at the most dangerous of times. This was not accidental, I mean we *are* talking about the originator of all things here. This was a choice. This was an *intentional incarnation*. And any time we see the intentional action of God, we must pay attention to the meaning behind it.

By developing in a mother's womb and going through the process of birth and the life stage of infancy, God came to know what it means to be fully dependent on another being. And God forever proclaimed that there is divinity in babies and children. By being born into poverty, God came to know the reality of the vast majority of the world—their suffering, their resilience, their struggling, and their strength. And God forever proclaimed that there is divinity in the poor. By being born into a subjugated people group, God came to know what it's like to experience violence in all its ugly forms—structural, communal, and interpersonal. And God forever proclaimed that there is divinity in the victims and survivors. And by being born to Mary, God came to know the most important thing of all. God came to know unconditional love, that manifestation of God's image that God had placed in us at the very beginning. And God forever proclaimed that there is divinity in our love for each other.

Peace on earth, and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled!

"Alleluia, alleluia!

Alleluia, Lord Most High!" Amen!

