

PEACE OF FAVOR

Today is a “thin place.” The phrase “thin place” refers to moments in space and time where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we are able to catch some kind of glimpse into realms beyond our immediate sensory world.

This is a day of tension as well. The way the calendar falls this year makes this tension especially poignant. For most of us, today is Christmas Eve and we have done (almost) everything that needs to be done to prepare for Christmas, and whatever has been not completed might have to be left undone.

However, this morning is also *not* Christmas Eve. It is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Depending on your point of view, you are either ready to move quickly into Christmas Eve or you think you are getting gypped by missing a week of contemplation of our theme for our fourth Sunday of Advent, and that theme is peace. That is the desire represented by the fourth candle we lit this morning.

Our meditative themes for the first three weeks of Advent have been hope, love and joy. And in our Christmas preparations, we have had some time to think, meditate, pray and live into these themes, hopefully with love and joy, for a full week between the introduction of the following week’s Advent theme. This week’s theme is “condensed” in a strange and possibly wonderful way.

If you are ready to move straight into Christmas Eve, I trust it is in full readiness to receive God’s gift given to a broken world almost two thousand years ago. It’s a world that is still broken today, and God’s gift will be given again, if we are ready and willing to receive it.

Today our theme is peace. How interesting it is to me to think about the message of the calendar and the possible “thin place” between the fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve. If we rush through it, we might miss it. It’s as though the calendar is saying to us, “Okay, here’s what you need to do ...” 10am worship service ... peace ... right ... got it! Now on to Christmas Eve Family Service at 4pm or our traditional 7pm Candlelight Service ... right ... got it! Welcome Jesus! Glad you made it ... right ... got it! Now it’s time for presents and dinner and cleaning up ... right ... got it! Oh, I almost forgot ... oh, I almost forgot ... I almost forgot.

Or we can take a few moments this morning to think about peace. What it is that we are hoping to lovingly and joyfully receive? Like any Sunday school class when the answer to a question is in doubt, “Jesus” is almost always a great answer. And of course, Jesus *is* the answer to more than we can possibly imagine. I also want to invite you to think about this: What is it that you are hoping to lovingly and joyfully receive this Advent season? I think the answer of how we ultimately receive Jesus is also inextricably connected to peace. I am hoping to lovingly and joyfully receive peace this morning so that I might be more fully ready to receive Jesus this afternoon and evening.

This morning can be a “thin place” time if you will let it. Religious scholar Mircea Eliade wrote in his classic work *The Sacred and the Profane* that “some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.” This sanctuary is a place that is different than other places. And this moment in time is different than other moments in time. I invite you to ask God to make this a “thin place” for you this morning.

So if we are seeking peace this morning in order to be more fully ready to receive Jesus later, we might need to shed a little more light on just what it is we are seeking. Peace seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Well, straightforward is not always as simple as it seems.

When I got out of college, I went to work for a paper manufacturing business representing a collection of about eighteen paper mills. One of my first responsibilities was to process the paperwork for complaints we would receive from customers all over the country about quality issues that would arise from time to time. Often these complaints would be about the color of the paper not matching the color that the customer was expecting to be delivered. The blue might be too “warm” or too “cool,” and that was easy to understand. But one of the complaints I got early on was about white paper that was the wrong color. I said to my boss, “It's *white*. How can it be the wrong color?” His answer stayed with me forever: “White comes in many colors.”

And I think that is also true of many seemingly straightforward things like peace. Peace comes in many forms. If we seek peace just like the broken world in which we live seeks peace, we will not be transformed or “converted” to be more like Christ. To do that, we need to be reoriented in our thinking and in our expectations.

I have been part of this congregation for twenty-two years. For those twenty-two years, I have had, and many of you have had, the privilege of the teaching, interpretation and wisdom of Bruce Van Blair. For those twenty-two years, Bruce has served this congregation as Senior Minister, Associate Minister, Pastor Emeritus and Senior Minister again. That's also twenty-two Advent and Christmas seasons, and over the years I have often heard Bruce comment, "Christmas doesn't convert anyone." When I first heard that, I wanted to protest because Christmas is a wonderful time of the year ... in fact, it's "the *most* wonderful time of the year," as the song tells us!

But wonderful is not the same as transformation. Christmas is often too lovely to move us into transformation. We are creatures who mostly change when we are forced by life and circumstances to change. So Bruce is right that most of us do not hit that "grace of point zero" moment – that point of time when we fully turn life and will over to God – at Christmastime. It will probably have to come at some other time. It's like trying to fly from L.A. to Wilderness Waterway, Florida: you can't get there from here; you have to go someplace else first.

Kierkegaard wrote: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." So for most of us here this morning, we have a lot of life to look back over and to try to understand. But how do we live it "forwards," as Kierkegaard says? That is the purpose and meaning of Advent ... the preparation time ... the WE RECALL we said this morning. When Advent ends, for most of us our preparation for transformation is not over ... and it is never complete, I'm sad to say. But it does get more fun and exciting all the time. We are blessed and fortunate to be in a community of faith that helps us to pray, study, contemplate, implement and live out that preparation with others who are trying to do the same. We have guidance from Bruce's series on the "Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life." If we take these disciplines seriously and put these disciplines into practice, we will be "converted" or transformed ... that is a promise. It's not easy, but it's pretty simple. The answers do not come in any full sense of completeness in five minutes, or in four weeks of Advent preparations. But it is a start, and a start is sometimes all we need to get us more fully prepared to receive God's gift to the world once again.

Conversion may come. Transformation may come. Alignment with God's will may come. Alignment with God's purpose for our lives may come. All of that time of possibility is revealed in hope, love, joy and

peace. All of those are qualities of possibilities that are revealed by Jesus. They all exist before Jesus is born, but through Jesus the intangibles of God are revealed in the “thin places” such as this morning.

Our scripture readings this morning are snippets for contemplation. Each is, of course, part of a larger narrative gospel story, but for this morning I think they are worthy of our contemplation in their brevity and in their connection to each other.

In our Luke verse, we hear “*Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*” (Luke 2:14 CEB) What does peace mean in this verse, and what does it mean to be “favored” by God? Peace is related to wholeness or completeness. It was considered in the Old Testament a God-given gift, but it was obtained by following the law. In the New Testament, the meaning expands to be a kind of inner tranquility and poise of the Christian who trusts in God, through Jesus. Jesus spoke of this peace as a combination of hope and trust and quietness of mind and soul and also happiness because of reconciliation with God. This is the peace proclaimed by the angels in this passage from Luke.

Years ago, there was a “family squabble” in our church about a banner that would hang above the cross at Christmastime that read “Peace on Earth.” Bruce pointed out, quietly and correctly, that the banner was not an accurate depiction of the message and purpose for which Jesus came. In our Luke passage, there is a big difference between “peace on earth” and what the angels said, which was “on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Peace on earth is a universal quality that did not exist then, does not exist today, and will *never* exist in this broken realm. Peace among “those whom he favors” is a personal quality that did exist for some then, does exist for some today, and will exist for all time in this broken realm for “those whom he favors.” And so it seems to me I want to find out how to be among those whom God favors. Does that mean I have to earn it from God? Absolutely not! The favor of God comes as I align to the meaning, purpose and will of God, and when that happens I am in the “thin place” of connection between God and me ... the collapsed space between heaven and earth. That is the peace I seek this morning.

In our two readings from John, we hear Jesus once again telling us not to look for peace in the way the world thinks of peace. Jesus knows and wants *us* to know that seeking that kind of peace is a fool’s errand.

Listen again to Jesus' words: "*Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid.*" (John 14:27 CEB)

And finally, in our last scripture snippet for this morning, Jesus tells us why he has revealed the things of heaven and God's kingdom. He says: "*I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.*" (John 16:33 CEB)

We are in a tension time of looking backwards over our own lives, but also looking backwards at the lives of millions of others and noticing the folly of seeking peace as the world seeks peace. We are in a tension time of living forwards in hopeful, loving and joyful anticipation of seeking peace the way *Jesus* reveals peace. If we are able to do that, we will be more fully ready to receive Jesus as the Christ child that will come this night, and the Christ that will continue to be revealed throughout all time, but also personally and profoundly in our own lives as we move forward.

Reorientation of thought is necessary, and reorientation of practice is also necessary. We do not fight for peace; we embody peace. We also seek it by asking for it. Our expectation and intention make a difference in what we ultimately receive.

In honor of that, I invite us to take a few minutes this morning to join as a worshiping congregation in a guided meditation prayer and exercise. In this guided meditation, I will offer a prayer by Ted Loder entitled "There Is Something I Wanted to Tell You" from his book *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. We will take about five minutes, with some silent spaces between prayer verses for your own reflection. There will be soft music playing in the background. The song is entitled "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room" (by John Mayer and performed by Mike Dawes), and it seems a fitting song for the tension in which we live in this "thin place" time as we slow down and invite God's presence, even in a burning place.

I invite you to come, be still ... relax and close your eyes. God is in this "thin place" here and now.

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[The guided meditation can be found at around the 42:43 mark in the online video of this worship service available in the archives of [CdM Community Church, Congregational](#) or [The New Church](#).]

If you experienced God's presence in this "thin place," give thanks and praise. If you did not experience God's presence, do not despair or worry. Continue to seek and ask for God's presence and you will receive it ... that is a promise. God "favors you," and if you can truly know that God's favor is love, you will also truly know peace.

May it be so.

Amen.