

Finding Peace in Advent with God our Shepherd **Isaiah 40:1-11, John 10:11-16**

Where do you find peace during Advent? Last week I posed this question as an Advent challenge. In my very unscientific survey of about 10 responses, at least half of them mentioned Christmas lights. There is indeed something peaceful about sitting by a Christmas tree covered with lights. Interestingly, many of those who mentioned Christmas lights as a source of peace during Advent also mentioned young children. I wonder if perhaps in the gentle glow of Christmas lights, even the over-excitement of children anticipating Christmas is calmed. We often find peace in the lights of the Christmas tree. Others responded that they find peace while driving and praying, when watching birds, in the stillness of the water and the beauty of God's creation, in cooking for others, and with family.

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation. I would guess that most of the time, expectation and preparation are not words that we associate with peace. When we know others have expectations of us, we often feel anxious, wondering what those expectations are and trying to be sure that we meet them. When we have expectations, we are often anxious about whether, when and how these expectations will be met. When we have preparations to make, whether we are preparing for a test, preparing for an interview, preparing a meal, or preparing for some other event, we may feel anxious about completing all the tasks on our list and properly preparing for what is to come. Expectation and preparation often stir up anxiety. Yet during Advent, this season of expectation and preparation, we are reminded that Jesus brings peace. We light a candle of peace, perhaps because during this season, we are frequently reminded of how much we need peace.

We do not have to look very far to find examples of a world in need of peace. From war torn countries, to political divisions in our own country, to acts of violence, to natural disasters, we are surrounded by a lack of peace. I am reminded of the song lyrics: *Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.* Our world is in desperate need of peace. But often there is one small step we can take, one small action we can do, to help bring about peace.

I have seen a great deal of those actions recently. During the past couple of weeks, our church has been involved in at least six different projects to help others in our community.

1. We are collecting gifts for the Magi program, which provides Christmas gifts for children in our school system whose families are in need of financial assistance.
2. We are collecting money to buy meat for the Collins Children's Home.
3. We have a fund called the Hands and Feet fund, which is part of our Children's ministry, and which is used to help meet needs of children and families in our

community. This year, we have used that fund to help provide Christmas gifts for 6 children.

4. We are in the process of putting together emergency food boxes, which we have been distributing for several years now, and which provide a couple of days' worth of food for people who are hungry, to help give them time to access other resources.
5. This past Saturday, we had a group who cut and delivered firewood to people who need it for heat, which became a more urgent need with the weekend's freezing temperatures.
6. Our mission committee recently provided some assistance to a family facing an emergency situation.

All of these projects are local ways that we are offering peace to our neighbors.

Sometimes peace means taking away a parent's worry about not being able to buy Christmas gifts or the new shoes their child needs. Sometimes peace means offering a source of warmth on a cold night. Sometimes peace means easing the financial stress of how to make ends meet this month by helping to pay a bill. Sometimes peace means offering a meal to someone who is hungry. In these and so many other ways, our church is sharing peace with our neighbors.

In addition to all of these local projects, December is also one of the months during the year when we emphasize the Offering for Global Missions. Last Sunday, we had planned to show a brief video that shares a story about this mission offering. Due to the icy conditions of roads in our community, we had to cancel services, but you may see the video here: <https://vimeo.com/274373106>

Giving to this offering is another way we share the peace of Christ, not only with the children in Macedonia who will live in the children's home, but with young women like Natalia, who have a dream and a calling. By partnering with her, walking alongside her, and helping make that dream come true, we are sharing peace with a sister in Christ.

As we worship during the season of Advent, we light the candle of peace on the Advent wreath, remembering that this peace is not just for us, but this peace is meant to be shared. Our Scripture reading for the 2nd Sunday of Advent offers words of peace from the book of Isaiah. Chapter 40 begins with "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

These words may appear to come in the middle of a long book; Isaiah has 66 chapters! But most scholars suggest it would be more accurate to divide Isaiah into 2 or even 3 books, and to place chapter 40 at the beginning of what they call Second Isaiah. Chapter 40 marks an important division in the book of Isaiah. And this division, this new section, begins with words of Comfort.

Advent is the beginning of the Christian year. We too begin this new cycle with a focus on peace. In tumultuous times, our faith calls us back to the basics, to peace, to remember that God is a God of comfort.

The people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. They are beginning to wonder if God has forgotten them. Some of them have been wondering this for awhile. They were taken captive and now they are living in a foreign land, at the mercy of foreign ruler.

Yet even here, God says, "Comfort, Comfort, my people." And they are offered this image of God as a shepherd. Isaiah 40 verse 11 reads: **He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.** What a powerful image of God scooping up God's people in God's arms like a shepherd carries his sheep and saying "Shhh, shhhh, comfort, comfort my people," like a mother soothes a crying baby.

In the gospel of John, we find this image of God as Shepherd once again when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd not only speaks words of comfort and peace to his sheep, but he gives his very life to ensure the safety of his sheep. Jesus also reminds us that the comfort of God and the peace of our shepherd is not only for us. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold," Jesus says. "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

The peace of Advent is for us, even in difficult times, as God spoke words of comfort to Israel even when they were in exile.

The peace of Advent is not only for us, but for all who will listen to God's voice, for all who will follow Jesus.

May the peace of Christ be with you.