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Advent: True Peace

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Advent: True Peace

Abstract

"Viewing peace as quiet or the end of fighting is not a full enough vision of what God's peace truly is."

Posting about Advent peace from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/advent-true-peace/>

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Advent: True Peace

Abby Foreman

In a popular Rockwell painting from mid-20th century, a mother and father gaze down on two sleeping children tucked cozily in their bed. The father's hand clutches a folded newspaper; viewers can make out only part of the headline, "Bombings...horror."¹ As I look at the scene, I am struck by how often I have felt what I imagine these parents felt—a paradox between the peaceful, sleeping children and the worries, concerns, and fear that come with living in a world full of really bad news. I would imagine Mary and Joseph felt it too at times, even as they gazed on the peaceful, sleeping, and perfect form of baby Jesus. We can recognize the goodness and beauty of God's creation even as we are confronted by a world wracked with broken relationships, injustice, and disease. We know, at the core of our very image-bearing beings, that this is not the way it should be.

We live in that tension-filled space of the already and the not yet. We are blessed, in the form of a sleeping babe, to glimpse God's good design for His creation and His image bearers. But we also know that our own sleeping children will wake and will be sinful and so will we. Paradox. Round and round we go. We cry out in pain, seeking forgiveness; it seems hopeless in our finite and limited imaginations. In this time of Advent, though, we especially remember the greatest relief to our hopeless and broken situation—the birth of a King, the Prince of Peace.

Peace, peace, peace—the choir sings and the angels proclaim. I am often guilty of viewing peace too narrowly, as an absence of noise or conflict. If we think back to the parents gazing down on the sleeping children, we can imagine that they may just be grateful for the quiet at the end of a long day of parenting. Viewing peace as quiet or the end of fighting is not a full enough vision of what God's peace truly is.

In Psalm 85, the Psalmist describes true peace: “I will listen to what God the Lord will say; he promises peace to his people...Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”² There is a fullness to God’s peace that we should not miss. One of my favorite articulations of what God’s full peace looks like is from Plantinga:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.³

Plantinga’s description and Psalm 85 emphasize that “right-ness” is a part of true peace—things being set right. Righteousness and peace kiss, the Psalmist proclaims.

In high school catechism just a few years back, my pastor challenged the class to rephrase the Ten Commandments into positive rather than prohibitive commands. Bearing false testimony, for example, was transformed into a statement declaring commitment to honesty and truth telling. The pastor made the point that there is often power in being winsome and clearly articulating what it is that we are *for*, not just what we are against. I have never forgotten this piece of wisdom. In this Advent season, in a world where it is so clear that things are not right, I pray that we can give off the pleasing aroma of Christ and be winsome in inspiring wonder in the Prince of Peace. We do not minimize injustice, sinfulness, or pain and fear, but even still we can proclaim with delight that the God of justice and peace cared so deeply for us that He sent His Son to us in a lowly manger. The father in the Rockwell painting with his clutched newspaper, and we with our clutched smartphones, would do well to remember this. It is really, really Good News.

FOOTNOTES

1. Norman Rockwell, Freedom From Fear
2. Psalm 85: 8a, 10
3. Plantinga, C., Jr. *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, p. 10