



Peace In Our Hearts and In Our World
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12
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In the first 1200 years of Christianity, the most prominent feast was Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection. Around 1200, Francis of Assisi entered the scene, and he felt we didn't need to wait for God to love us through the cross and resurrection. He believed God loved us from the very beginning and showed this love by becoming incarnate in Jesus. He popularized what we take for granted today, the great Christian feast of Christmas. But Christmas only started being popular in the 13th century.

There is a switch in theological emphasis at play. Following Francis' lead, the Franciscans realized that if God had become flesh and taken on materiality, physicality, and humanity, then the problem of our unworthiness was solved from the very beginning! God "saved" us by becoming one of us! God was truly the Emmanuel, God-with-us. God is a *Companion-God* who delights in us and being in our "company," (from the Latin "*cum-panis*") breaking bread with us. Jesus' commitment to hurting humanity is seen very early in the availability, humility, and hospitality shown in his teaching and healing, and emphasized at the many banquets he participated in, welcoming, forgiving, and accepting all.

Franciscan sister and theologian Ilia Delio invites us to consider Advent as a time to wake up to God's incarnate presence:

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning arrival, "coming" . . .

[But] if God has already come to us, what are we waiting for? If God has already become incarnate in Jesus, what are we waiting for? We're called to awaken to what's already in our midst. . . I think Advent is a coming to a new consciousness of God, you know, already loving us into something new, into something more whole, that we're not in a sense waiting for what's not there; we're in a sense to be attending to what's already there.

So, in a way, we are all waiting for the Children of the Light to reveal themselves, that is, for all of us to become aware of the Presence of God in our midst and in our hearts and "come to the fore." It's up to us to become aware of the calling of God we have all received and affirmed at the time of our Baptism to live and grow in the power of the Word and the gifts of the Spirit. It's up to all of us to become witness of the new reality God invites the whole world to step into, the reality of Shalom, the vision of a reconciled world where hatred and violence and fear and jealousy are no more. We are all called to be prophets of hope and ambassadors of peace. The root of the Hebrew word for peace, "shalom," means "whole" and points to this twofold meaning: peace within oneself and peace between people.

St. Francis understood all that and so he prayed: "Lord, make me an instrument of Your Peace."

It isn't easy to be an instrument of peace. Those who are most vulnerable (girls and women, People of Color, gays and transgenders, immigrants and refugees, Jews and Muslim) spend much of their time on alert mode. They are the ones who live in a constant reality of hostility with much to lose from predators, haters, and abusers. Would they find refuge in the Church? Will the Church be as hospitable, humble, and welcoming as her founder, Jesus? Will the Church be a bold and visible advocate for the social rejects? Will the persecuted easily spot the local church as a safe place? Will they find peace in our midst? Or will they crash into the (not often so) invisible sign that reads: "Unwanted"?

How often do we ourselves live in fear and on the watch-out for injury from others? We mean to be kind and generous and yet we know that often unintentionally we hurt others. So, our hearts live in turmoil as we try to live and make choices that do not cause pain to others. And yet, at other times, we become (wittingly or unwittingly) participants in the injuries inflicted on others.

In fact, we can ask ourselves: have we ever laughed at a joke meant to demean (blond) women, gays, People of Color, immigrants? Have we listened to and passed along gossip about another person? Have we kept silent when witnessing an injustice? Peace will not be promoted as long as we unmask, reject, and denounce the harm done to other human beings and for that matter to all of creation.

Peace out there begins with peace in me just as change in the world begins with change in me. It begins with self-knowledge and an understanding of what we value. Self-observation and self-examination in a compassionate and nonviolent manner in the light of the Word will help us, with patience and tenderness, to grow in the Spirit of Jesus. Compassion, simplicity, and nonviolence will help us to cooperate with other like-minded people to shape the world in which we want to live.

Practice peace by refusing to participate in violence either directly or indirectly. Try to stay calm no matter how agitated the people around you become. Dial the anxiety down. Meet conflict with equanimity. Disarm yourself (lower your guard) as a first step in disarming the world. The inner mirrors the outer. In the world we encounter anger, aggression, discord, all conditions that upset our inner peace as well. We need to deal with them on both levels. Inner calm will sustain our efforts to make the world a more peaceful place.

So, how can we prepare the way of the Lord, the way of peace?

1. When I hear voices raised in strident and hostile tones, I take that as a cue for me to be an alert and active peacemaker.
2. When I see a map or a globe, I am reminded of the importance of praying and working for peace in our time.
3. Whenever I get angry, I vow not to add to the sum total of violence in the world.
4. When I am called to be a peacemaker, I am reminded that that's the blessing of the Children of God. (Matthew 5:9)
5. When I witness injustice, I stand up for peace and advocate for those wronged.

May the Prince of Peace keep alive in us the hope of Shalom. May all creatures live in peace. Amen.