

Back in May pastor Gina and I excitedly met and were dreaming up future sermon series that we might preach in our new appointment. When we got to Advent and Christmas, I pitched the idea of a movie-based series called The Reel Christmas. Gina jumped on the idea and immediately said she wanted to preach about Elf. In my mind it immediately clicked that the match between Buddy the Elf and Pastor Gina made a lot of sense. Both exude joy, would be extroverted enough to, say, sing loudly in a store for all to hear, and both have met hard challenges and struggles with deep and profound grace and care. So, as I sat there thinking about all the ways I could easily connect the dots between the character and the preacher, I hear the voice across the table from me say “and Jess, why don’t you take Scrooge”.

So, here we are in the second week of Advent and the second week of our sermon series The Reel Christmas Story and, to be honest, I am thrilled to be preaching on Scrooge because while I hope there are not a lot of dots to connect between Scrooge and I, he is a character who has profoundly shaped me as a young person. I can actually remember sitting and watching Scrooge as a little kid, maybe 10 or 11 years old and consciously thinking about the danger that a love of money could have on one’s soul and life and making a promise to myself that “greedy” would never be a word people would use to describe me.

You see, Scrooge, the greedy, selfish, angry main character is at war with himself and is angry with the world. His childhood loneliness, his adult heartbreak, his fear of not having enough coupled with bad experiences has turned him into a curmudgeon who is so at war with himself that he puts up walls to the world and treats others poorly. Scrooge seems like a lost cause, an unredeemable soul at the beginning of the book or movie when he says things like “I live in such a world of fools as this. ‘Merry Christmas!’ What is Christmas time to you but a time of paying bills without money. A time for finding yourself a year older and not a penny richer. If I could work my will every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart”. Scrooge is a lost cause when it comes to living a life of inner peace because he seems to be so deeply at war with himself-his past, his present and even the trajectory of his future.

Perhaps you know others who seem like a lost cause. Or perhaps there are situations in your life that seem hopeless and unredeemable. Perhaps you feel like you are a lost cause. I know there are times when I have felt this way. 2019 felt like a lost cause for me-my divorce was finalized in March and that was hard enough but then the fall came, and September was an emergency gall bladder removal surgery, October was a terrible car accident, November was the sudden death of my dad and then we all know what happened in 2020.

All of this has caused such inner turmoil and angst and uneasiness that peace has been hard to find and feel and I have wanted to build walls and write this whole season off as a lost cause.

And right now, we are collectively living through an incredibly difficult season.

We are in turmoil as we continue to stumble through the pandemic and each wave of variants. We are watching the prices increase at the pump and at the grocery store and wondering how it is all going to work out. We are becoming numb to the news of shooting after shooting because the pain is just too deep to bear and so we just silently pray “Oh God please at least not my kids or community”. Nation is rising against nation and families are rising against families as politics divide us. There is war within our souls as we are bombarded daily with high-tech gadgetry and new forms of entertainment that are just calling out our names tempting us, diverting our attention, and wasting our time.

Yes, there are wars being fought all around us.

In hospital beds as people are racked with pain.

In our streets as gangs and gun violence spirals out of control.

There are political wars that are being waged over human rights and there is a war against our planet with the environmental degradation we see worsening.

There are so many types unredeemable and undesirable things happening in our world that is hard not to be jaded and write it all off as a lost cause. It is hard not to just build walls against the world and turn away from it all in self-protection.

It's amazing that any of us are still open to the possibility of love, hope, joy, and peace being born again but, in the midst of this warring madness and turmoil our Scripture lesson for today offers us a prophecy of hope for peace.

You see when the prophet Isaiah writes the Scripture that we read this morning he is writing to a nation that has been destroyed by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

He is writing to a people who have been removed from their homes, their communities, their temple, and are living in exile. They are living in a time that felt like a lost cause, a time without hope, a time when darkness seemed to be winning.

And to these people we hear in our Scripture the prophet Isaiah proclaim that

(SLIDE) one day the instruments which cause destruction will be turned into instruments of construction and there will be no more war. That a day is coming when everything that was used to destroy life would be turned into tools that would harvest food and sustain life.

Isaiah is reminding God's people then and he is reminding God's people now that in the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains. The day is coming when God's house will be lifted above the hills and people will flock to it in droves. Our Scripture, even in the midst of terrible

circumstances, promises that a day is coming when peace will come, it will be hard work to get there but God will settle the disputes, war will be no more and we will all walk by the Lord's light. Isaiah is reminding to see the long view, the divine view and not let present circumstances harden our hearts, close us off to the good in the world, or build walls between ourselves and others. Isaiah is reminding us that peace and joy belong to God and that they are promised to us in all circumstances.

And then as if these prophetic words of good news were not enough, God went even further to show us the joy and peace meant for us by sending Jesus into our midst. God came to earth in the form of a human being and was tempted in every way that we are tempted. The God in flesh man named Jesus felt all the cravings of the flesh, the heartache of loss, the pain we experience in this life. And in the midst of that hardship, Jesus showed us how love radically, to turn the other cheek, offer forgiveness, take care of the poor and marginalized. Jesus showed us how to live a different way, a better way.

He taught us how to live through His teachings and His actions, and then He was crucified, revealing how at war humanity truly was and is.

In his Resurrection, he proved that death has no hold on Him, and that death has no hold on anyone who is in Him. Jesus promised to give us peace. Not as the world gives but as God gives. Jesus promised a peace that passes all understanding, a

peace that prevails all circumstances, a peace that addresses the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental warring.

This better way that Jesus shows us is meant to change who we are and how we live. That revelation of a better way is, I think, similar to the revelation of the three Christmas ghosts that Scrooge encounters, right? Scrooge has visits from the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. And as he wrestles with the loneliness of his past, the heartache of failed relationships, the disappointments of his life, he is able to see the world in a new way. As he is given a glimpse into the lives of his family and coworkers he sees a new perspective on them and the world. And as he visits the cold, harsh reality of his future if he does not change his ways, Scrooge is transformed. The world has not changed but through the spiritual encounter he has changed. He has been transformed into a softer, kinder, more loving, more generous soul. Like Scrooge it is walking with this promised Messiah, this Jesus, that we see the world differently and are called to end our inner wars and live at peace with ourselves, our families, our neighbors and the world. It is in knowing the ghost, the Holy Ghost that is, that we are awakened to a new way of being and seeing not only for ourselves individually but as a beloved community as well.

Because the ghosts came to Scrooge he was a changed man, a better man. And because Jesus came to us we are changed children of God, we are better children of

God. And that is why over the past two thousand years people have been flocking to Church, meeting Jesus and finding....peace! The peace that says I am a child of God, the peace that says God has the victory over all things, the peace that says justice wins, love prevails, and there will be peace on earth.

A relationship with Jesus Christ turns war-mongers into peace-makers, this relationship changes us and makes us better. A relationship with Jesus

A relationship with Jesus Christ transforms those with internal turmoil and strife into people who are able to face the trouble of this age with confidence, courage, and hope. This relationship with Jesus changes us and makes us better.

A relationship with Jesus Christ turns those who live in darkness, hatred, greed, fear, anger, and violence and calls us to be people of light, love, generosity, hope, joy and peace. This relationship with Jesus changes us and makes us better.

As I shared this passage was written when the people of the Southern Kingdom of Israel were under constant attack from both the Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Northern kingdom. They truly thought that the warring madness would never end and that peace would never happen. But when is the last time you were concerned about the peace situation of the Assyrian/Babylonian/Northern Kingdom situation? My guess is, you have never worried about it. Why? Because a day came when those weapons were finally laid down and peace found a way through the cracks of impossibility.

How did the irredeemable Scrooge finally find inner peace? Through the cracks of impossibility.

How will we find peace in our world or in our lives today? Through the cracks of the impossible. And do you know why? Because nothing is impossible with God.

So church...if you are searching for inner peace, if you are praying for peace around an issue that you are passionate about, if you are longing for the world to know peace in a real way, do not lose hope because in Christ the day has begun in which God's peace is prevailing on earth. The day has come and the past, present and future presence of Christ not only gives us that peace but invites us to be instruments of His peace. So, if you want more peace in the world, let it begin with you. Amen and amen.