



Isaiah 53:1-6  
 What's Under Your Tree?  
 Peace

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 December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
 Fourth Sunday in Advent

This morning we continue in our series of messages for Advent and Christmas titled, “What’s Under Your Tree?” It’s a look at some of the passages in the Old Testament prophetic book of Isaiah that Jesus fulfills. Although Isaiah was written several centuries prior to Jesus, the words of this ancient book *point* us to Jesus, and are *fulfilled* in Jesus.

And today we look at a passage that is all about the peace that God brings. As you probably know, “peace” is a quality that many people in this world aim for and would like to see as a reality in this world. We have different signs for peace; **(Peace Graphic Here)** we have awards for it such as the Nobel Peace Prize; and most, if not all, major religions claim that peace is a major emphasis of their teaching and doctrine – though they differ in how to have that peace be a reality in our lives. On a more personal level, people desire peace in their marriages, their parenting, their finances, their employment, and more. But peace seems ever-elusive for most people. Even churches struggle with peace. For instance, a church bulletin announcement once read: “The peace-making meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict.”<sup>i</sup>

So: **Can we have peace in life?** Is there a kind of peace that can permeate all of life, and give us a sense of calm in the midst of the storms, that’s reliable and dependable and doesn’t ebb and flow with our bank account, our relationships, or with relationships between nations? That would be a good kind of peace to have in life.

And: **Today’s passage from Isaiah answers this question for us.** Like the other passages we’ve looked at, even though this speaks of a future reality, it comes to us in the past tense, which communicates the certainty of these things. They are so sure to happen, that they can be written of as though they already have. And just as in the other messages in this series, the context here is that Israel is in exile. Their religious and political leaders, along with many others, have been physically removed from Israel. Some have been left behind, and they’re living under foreign government. Assyria was the first,

and then Babylon conquered Assyria and so they ended up under Babylonian rule. And about 2600 years later, we see that this part of the world is still in chaos and turmoil. Aleppo is about a 9 hour drive north of Jerusalem...the southern border of Syria is only about 3 ½ hours or so away from Jerusalem, and as you know, they are experiencing anything but peace, as the nation of Syria is in civil war, and other countries and people groups get involved...it's just ugly.

So as the prophet writes here some 2600 years ago, the people of Israel are in a terrible place. Now, the passage we read today is sort of the middle section of a stretch of Scripture that's all linked together. The last three verses of chapter 52 are the first section, and they come to us from God's perspective, speaking of his servant who will act wisely, who will be lifted up and exalted. This is God's servant, not the servant of humankind. So those last three verses of 52 speak of this servant, and people's reaction to him – some are appalled, while others are in absolute awe.

The second section is 53:1-6, and the third is 53:7-12. And the perspective shifts in 53, so that it's the voice of a collective group of people speaking. **“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1).** The emphasis here is on believing the message that has been revealed. And the message is that freedom and liberation for Israel will come. There is a hope and a future with good plans that God has for his people. And it's all going to happen through this servant, this one of whom the prophet writes.

And yet this servant who's going to be wise and exalted seems not to have anything about him worth exalting. **He had (has) no beauty, no majesty, nothing particularly attractive in his appearance.** And you see, part of the problem for where we seek to find peace is that we always look to what's attractive: money, power, the roof over our heads, the gifts under our trees, the employment contract, the checkbook, and so forth. We look at the surface, rather than what lies beneath, what the deeper reality is. And so: **No wonder peace is so elusive, because we're looking for it in all the wrong places.** Those things don't bring a peace that is durable and stands the test of time. Money can disappear, houses can fall apart, power is just trusting in

ourselves, employment can end, the gifts under the tree will largely be forgotten by next Christmas, if not sooner. And yet they all seem so attractive. **Ironically, the one who brings us peace has nothing physically attractive about him.**

In fact, Isaiah says that he's despised and rejected by mankind. He's a man of suffering...a man who's familiar with pain. So, ok...I mean does this sound like someone who's coming to give peace? Does this sound like someone who's going to bring relief to Israel? Sounds to me like someone with some compassion, and understanding of the pains of life...but it doesn't sound like someone who's the solution to our search for peace.

**Then in verse 4, the tide ever so slightly begins to shift.** We see it with the very first word, "Akain" which is often translated as "Surely." Some translations will read, "But"...I think a good translation that gets at the meaning is "nevertheless." In spite of his unimpressive beginnings, and unimpressive looks...nevertheless...he took our infirmities and took our sorrows. In fact, he's considered stricken by God, and afflicted. Of course, that makes it sound like he was God's adversary, rather than his servant. Why would God strike down his servant?

And then we in verses 5 and 6 the complete shift, that this unimpressive looking guy bears our pain and sorrows...not for his benefit, but for ours. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all have gone astray, each has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him (this servant) the iniquity of us all." **This change from "rejected and suffering" to "by his wounds we are healed" is unexpected, and the unspoken, though alluded to, reason for it is the power of God.** It's all under God's purview and according to His will that this happens, and therefore must be the reason that something good actually comes from this.

The third section is verses 7-12, the rest of Isaiah 53, and it continues in this same vein, speaking of one who would receive the pain and the punishment of humanity upon himself, and yet be considered great, and will be satisfied. And the beneficiaries of it all are people like you and me. And then Isaiah 53

closes with this final prophetic word: “For he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

The result of this intercession, of this taking of punishment on behalf of others is seen in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> verse, “...**the punishment that brought us peace (shalom) was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed**” (Isaiah 53:5b). The amazing thing about this servant is that as he serves God, the beneficiaries are the people who believe this message. The community of believers are the ones who benefit from all this. And the benefit that we have is peace, shalom. This is foundational, life-changing peace being talked about. This is peace with God, your creator, your sustainer, your redeemer, your healer. This is peace with the one who spoke creation into being, who establishes righteousness, who loves unconditionally...this servant gives us peace with this God.

You see: **Our lack of peace in life is completely rooted in a lack of peace with God.** And when we seek to find peace in all the wrong places, we only perpetuate the problem. But there *is* a way to peace...Because there *is* a servant who fulfilled all of these prophecies here, along with others elsewhere in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament, and he gives us this deep and abiding peace that we crave. And the servant’s name is Jesus. **Jesus is the servant who brings us peace with our Creator.** Jesus said that he came to do his Heavenly Father’s will (John 6:38, 4:34)...that he came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). He is the Lord’s servant. And everything that’s spoken in this passage about this servant – in the six verses we’ve focused on here in chapter 53, but also the few before it at the end of chapter 52, and the ones that go to the end of chapter 53....Everything that is said of this servant comes to fruition in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was wise, he was lifted up, he was exalted, he was appalled at by many and yet kings shut their mouths because of him, he had nothing special about him physically, he was despised and rejected, he was familiar with suffering, he was stricken by God, he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, he took our punishment, he was oppressed and afflicted, he didn’t open his mouth in defense of himself, he was led like a lamb to slaughter, he was assigned the grave of a rich man, he had done no violence,

he had no deceit. All of those statements come from Isaiah 53, and all of them describe Jesus, the one who gives us this shalom, this peace.

There are a couple things about this peace that help us to recognize that it's a deeper peace than the peace most of the world looks for, that's different than the failing peace we might seek to gain from the gifts under our trees. The first thing that's different about it is seen when Jesus says to his disciples, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:26)**. So this peace that Jesus gives is a peace that is not what the world offers. If we're looking for real peace from any source other than Jesus, then we're not going to find it. Any other version of peace is a fake and a fraud and will ultimately not deliver on its promise of peace.

The second thing that's different is communicated when Paul writes in the letter of Philippians, **“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7)**. Worldly peace is a peace that comes from our own understanding of things or fits within our understanding. The peace that Jesus offers does not. It doesn't make sense. It transcends our ability to understand it and comprehend it, which we see in today's passage, because it's incomprehensible that Jesus, who had done nothing to bring the ending to his life that came his way, was in fact executed on a cross. It makes no sense to you or me. He wasn't guilty of sin, he hadn't disobeyed his heavenly father, he didn't break any laws, he hadn't lived selfishly or committed any crimes...he never even treated anyone disrespectfully or rudely. Those are the kinds of things we're guilty of. And yet *he* took our punishment; he bore the consequences of our disobedience. It's beyond understanding, but it brings us a peace that we can't buy, wrap, and put under our trees.

There's a story I've shared once before about a pastor who once gave a very long and boring sermon. The people filed out after the service saying nothing to the preacher. Towards the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons. “Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!” The pastor was thrilled. “No-one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why.” “Well – it

reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!” (In case you’re wondering: no, that is not an autobiographical story.) Sermons should not pass all understanding...but the peace that Jesus brings – not for himself, but for those who believe the message of his life, death, and resurrection – that peace does surpass all understanding.

I want to close with a brief video illustration that I hope will help us to understand the depth and the power of this peace that Jesus gives. In World War I there was an incident that happened between English and German soldiers that illustrates for us the power of the peace that Jesus gives. This is a true story from Christmas Eve in 1914: you can read about it and watch documentaries about it online.<sup>ii</sup> I want to show you a commercial for a European chocolate bar company that utilizes this true story. Maybe it’s unfortunate that this event in history has been commercialized for the profit of a company – but look at what we’ve done with Christmas, the most commercial holiday of them all, so let’s not get too critical here. Watch this...<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWF2JBb1bvM>

**They found peace that night in the middle of a battlefield in World War I because of Jesus, as they celebrated Christmas.** And that’s the kind of peace that Jesus brings. It is a life-changing, foundational, peace in the midst of the battles of life. It could have altered the landscape of WW I if those few hours of peace could have spread across the battle fronts and up the ranks of commanders elsewhere. But it’s a powerful example of the peace of Christ touching people’s lives in a real and profound way.

And if you’re looking for this kind of meaningful peace under your Christmas tree, you’re not likely to find it there. I’m sure that the things under there are fun, or maybe needed in your life. And there’s nothing wrong with giving and receiving gifts (I wrapped a whole bunch of gifts last night that are now under our tree). **But let’s not bet even a penny on any of them bringing peace that lasts.** Only Jesus gives that gift. Like I suggested a few weeks ago with hope...maybe this year under your tree you put a piece of paper with the word “peace” on it in an envelope, and place it under your tree. You could include this Isaiah 53:5 verse...or the John verse or the

Philippians verse. You might do something similar with “joy” and “love” as well, the themes from the last two Sundays. Four envelopes that are gifts from Jesus to you, that you open under your tree this Christmas. I don’t have any idea what’s under any of your trees this year, but I hope and pray this Christmas we’d all open the gifts that Jesus gives of hope, love, joy, and peace. Let’s Pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://igbarb19.wordpress.com/2010/04/20/some-rather-few-peace-related-jokes/>

<sup>ii</sup> For instance: <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/christmas-truce-of-1914>