

# Advent: Wholesome Peace - 12th December 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] As we said at the top, we're in week three of this season of Advent, a week when we're thinking about peace. As I said, we'll do things slightly differently this morning, but I just want to share a few thoughts on that, some thoughts which obviously will be shaped by the news of Keith this weekend.

So they get us going, though, this word peace, what is peace? Well, it's a word which we read time and again in the Bible, a word which has multiple layers, multiple levels to it. And on perhaps the most obvious level, we could define peace as the absence of conflict. So where warring factions decide to stop fighting, they're often said to be at peace.

They may not still like each other, they may not get on, but since they're not at each other's throats, since there's an absence of conflict, they're reckoned to be at peace.

And yet that kind of understanding of what peace is, well, it's defined, it seems, by what actually peace isn't, as in it isn't conflict, rather than what peace actually is.

[ 1 : 18 ] Whereas, you see, the main way the Bible defines peace is in a far more positive, far more present way than that. Indeed, the original Hebrew word in the Bible for peace is the word shalom, which means complete or whole.

Now, interestingly, some of the roots of this word shalom come from the idea of a completed wall, which has no gaps, you know, no missing bricks.

Whilst a wall may have lots of pieces, lots of parts, lots of bricks, there's shalom, there's wholeness, when every part is in place.

And yet you'll know as well as me, there are all sorts of things in life which can rob us of our peace. Things which can leave us feeling less than whole, less than complete.

COVID, for example. And the anxiety that comes with it, especially with this latest variant, it robs us of some of our peace, like a brick, if you like, being taken out of that complete wall.

[ 2 : 30 ] Alongside pandemic, related health concerns, perhaps more general health worries you might be carrying. You know, chronic pain we carry, undiagnosed conditions, treatment we know we need to go through.

They can be other things which rob us of our peace, taking another brick out of our wall of completeness. Financial worries, especially around this time of year, the pressures we can feel to make ends meet, they can rob us of some of our peace.

Fraught relationships, whether with friends or family, difficult past, an unsettled present. Again, another brick perhaps feels like it's gone.

Equally though, loneliness, the lack of friendships, the difficulty in meeting people who we click with and so on. It can disrupt, can dislodge our sense of peace in life.

Maybe a lack of contentment at work, that sense of feeling that you're not in the right job or doing something that energises you, that struggle to find the right role.

[ 3 : 37 ] That can rob us of peace, of feeling complete. And then of course, grief. Often a big one.

The loss of loved ones can leave us feeling like there are now all sorts of gaps in our lives that weren't there before. And that can rob us of our peace.

You know, all number of things, especially in these current times, can leave us feeling disrupted, dislodged, lacking a sense of wholeness, a sense of shalom, that all will be well.

I know for me, if you were here a couple of weeks ago, when we thought about hope, I shared how hard I find it sometimes to maintain or be sustained in my hope when there are so many weighty things going on that we're involved with.

You know, for me, it wasn't and it isn't that my faith is rocked by those experiences. I don't generally struggle with believing in the truth of God's goodness and love.

[ 4 : 43 ] Rather, the struggle I was trying to convey, really, is to put these two things together. The truth of God's goodness with the reality of real pain and difficulty around me.

That's what sometimes robs me of my peace. My sense of wholeness, like bricks missing from the wall of my life. And so knowing that I was struggling a bit, I took myself off on my own for a few days away, week before last, to Shropshire.

Went down to Church Stretton. And I like walking. So I did a couple of long walks up on Long Mind, is that how you say it? Up on the moors on the hillside there.

There's beautiful scenery up there. I did one day. I walked for about 14 miles. Yeah, knackered by the end of it. But it was good. It was good. It was a freezing day, though.

There was snow on the ground. It was hard going. But it was beautiful. Not least. Because there was hardly anyone else around. I'm a big introvert.

[ 5 : 50 ] And I get a bit peopled out sometimes. So a day away from life was what I thought I needed. What I thought I needed, perhaps, to be able to pray and find peace, you know, to restore those bricks, to find that inner wholeness again.

And yet, as I neared the end of my walk, and as the sun was going down, I was aware after a long day of walking that I still didn't really feel peaceful.

I didn't feel like I got the answers or heard from God in a way I thought I needed to. You know, the landscape was undeniably beautiful.

But after a day spent on my own, alone, you know, the barrenness, if you like, the lack of life up there, it suddenly hit me and made me feel quite sad, quite lonely, quite incomplete, if you like.

So just about this spot here where I took this photo, I stopped and I just quietly said to God, Come on, you've got to give me something here. I've been talking on and off with you all day, and I haven't really felt much, to be honest.

[ 7 : 05 ] And as I stood on top of this peak and looked around me at this beautiful but barren landscape, I suddenly noticed that a horse had come up very close to me.

Now, there's nothing spooky about this. There are a fair few wild horses up there doing the rounds on those peaks. But for some reason, I hadn't noticed this particular wild horse approaching.

And it was a beautiful horse, a beautiful white horse, whose outline was highlighted by the setting sun. And so me and this horse just kind of stood there for a moment, really, looking at each other for a minute or two, you know.

I'm not really an edible kind of person. I can't believe I'm going to say this. But it was almost like a kind of moment of connection between me and this beast, this horse. That's why I took a photo of it, where I was, to remember it.

Because all of a sudden, as I looked at that horse, I felt more peaceful than I had done all day. You know, more peaceful in that moment, if I'm honest, than I had done for some time.

[ 8 : 18 ] The wind dropped. And it was one of those moments of like, oh, okay, okay. Now, what was going on at that point? Well, the feeling I got, and the feeling which has stayed with me, is that God had given me a sense of peace in that moment.

Not from the barrenness of the landscape. Not through the absence of life. But rather, God's peace had come to me through the presence of life with me.

Now, perhaps God, in his mercy for my introvert ways, had given me that presence of life, not through a person, but through an animal who wasn't going to talk to me.

I don't know. But it did nevertheless feel significant to me that after a day of walking and a day of seeking God's peace in the solitude of my walk, actually my deepest awareness of God's peace had come through connecting with something that was living.

And that, I think I want to suggest today, is what the peace of Advent, the peace of Christmas, the peace of God is all about. You see, when we feel robbed of peace, when we feel a lack of wholeness, when we feel as if the bricks in the wall of our lives begin to come out, there's an absence there that we can so easily be tried and tempted to fill in all sorts of ways.

[ 9 : 50 ] So perhaps we try to work harder, play harder, exercise harder, drink harder. Maybe we decide to buy lots of new stuff. Maybe we have a mass clear out.

I don't know. All sorts of ways we try and fill those gaps. Now, not all of those ways are necessarily wrong, but ultimately the peace we're looking for, the sense of wholeness, the sense of completeness, that sense of shalom, that comes not through the life we try to make for ourselves, but it comes through the life we accept and receive from the presence of God with us.

That's why, I think, Jesus' birth in the New Testament was announced as the arrival of peace. Glory to God in the highest, said the angels. And now we're the coming of Jesus on earth. Peace. The time and again, the angels say to Mary, they say to Joseph, they say to the shepherds, do not be afraid.

Why? Because peace. Because the Prince of Peace is coming, has come to be with them. And it's a theme which continues through Jesus' life because the adult Jesus says to his followers at one point, my peace I give to you all.

[ 11 : 18 ] That's what arisen Jesus says on greeting his disciples following his resurrection. Peace be with you in that passage where he breathes his peace on them. Because it's only through Jesus and through the presence of his spirit with us that we can know ultimately the fullness of life, the completeness of peace.

The peace of God in our lives which transcends our understanding but makes a home with us in our hearts. Indeed, Jesus.

Jesus is the one who makes our lives whole not by pretending the challenges and difficulties we face don't exist but by helping us to know his peace in the midst of those tough times.

And so brick by brick, if you like, Jesus referred to as the living stone in 1 Peter. Jesus offers himself to us as we deal with the anxieties of this new wave of the pandemic.

Jesus is the one who calms our fears and works for our well-being as we face our health concerns.

[ 12 : 38 ] Jesus is the one who helps to keep our perspective in our financial worries. Jesus is the one who calls us to generously provide for the needs of others.

Jesus is the one who shows us how to make peace with our past and live in peace with the present.

Jesus is the one who shows us our intrinsic worth even if the world around us feels sometimes a lonely place to be.

Jesus is the one who offers us productive and fulfilling ways to serve others within our community even if our paid work or the lack of it sometimes leaves us feeling underwhelmed to say the least.

And Jesus is the one who offers us hope and comfort and strength as we grieve the loss of those we've loved.

For he himself is our peace as it says in Ephesians. The one who through prayer the one who through the support of those around us the one who through the indwelling presence of his spirit in us is our peace.

[ 14 : 04 ] And in the midst of all we're facing my prayer is that we would know the peace of God in our lives both now and always.

Amen. Amen.