

“Child of Peace?”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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A number of Christmases ago, about 38 to be exact, I went into my Episcopal church up in New York about 7 p.m. for the Christmas Eve worship service. As I entered the church, a light snow was beginning to come down, placing a light, white dusting over the brown winter grass. The service that night was a very traditional Christmas Eve service. We sang hymns, we read the Christmas story, we lit candles, and we ended with singing Silent Night. In various ways for nearly an hour and a half, we talked about, we sang about, we prayed about, and we thought about the meaning of the birth of Christ—the birth of what was referred to again and again that evening as The Prince of Peace. It was a warm, familiar and comforting service, made even more meaningful and, indeed, magical by the five inches of snow that had fallen while we were in the church. The earth was covered in a white blanket. I walked home that night in the snow and, indeed, it felt like The Prince of Peace had come specifically to our town.

Christmas has become, and has always been, at least in recent history, an interesting mix of rabid consumerism and deep sentimentality. Over and above the shopping, the parties, community events and family obligations, there is this very overt nod to the tenderness, the joy and the nostalgia of this season. It is like there is something in the idea of Christmas that we desperately need and frantically search for. Sometimes we search in all the wrong places but, nevertheless, we search. Our faith tradition tells us that, with the birth of The Prince of Peace, somehow the world has changed and God has intervened in history in human form. It is what we call the incarnation--Jesus, Immanuel (with God) we say, God sitting down beside of us in our pain and troubles and our joys and reassuring us that everything is going to be okay. The Prince of Peace has come. Think, pray and believe in him and don't worry about a thing. It is a reassurance that we need to hear again. Perhaps we need to hear this again more than ever.

In the wake of this week's mass shootings, a new wrinkle has entered into the shape of our public dialogue, a new wrinkle in which some people are wondering about the value of thoughts and prayers. Again and again and again, public officials of all stripes and parties are offering up the sentiment that our thoughts and our prayers are with the people of California. It is a statement of concern and politeness and, after all, what else could we say? For an increasing number of people, it's not enough. Do something, say these voices of frustration. Prayer is fine, but let's get busy before the next shooting happens. The media pundits are calling this wrinkle of public dialogue as “prayer shaming”, exemplified perfectly by this post on Twitter this Wednesday. This gentleman posted “Your thoughts should be about steps to take to stop this carnage. Your prayers should be for forgiveness if you do nothing”. You could hear the shaming in the Twitter.

This back and forth dialogue between those offering prayers and those calling for action is, of course, a false dichotomy as if only one or the other is a valuable response, but as we Christians gather during this Advent and Christmas season, it is worth taking some time to think about Jesus as The Prince of Peace and how do we engage in this claim. Is our belief in Jesus as The Prince of Peace a simply a statement of sentimentality? Is it just a reassuring title to which we offer our thoughts and prayers? It is maybe just a personal, individualized faith claim to which we give intellectual assent, or do we claim Jesus as The Prince of Peace for what he has called his followers to do, to the new way of living that he called those first disciples to live? Are we to simply believe in The Prince of Peace or are we to embody with our own lives The Prince of Peace and all he stood for? Perhaps in our time, in our moment in history, in our moment in our own nation, perhaps that eternal question of what would Jesus do is the question for our time. Do we pray and think, or do we act? The answer to that question, of course, is...yes! We must offer up our thoughts and prayers. We must be moved to action. We must

claim Jesus as The Prince of Peace and the focal point of our faith. We must embody all that he lived, talked and acted upon. If we truly want others to believe in The Prince of Peace and to walk in his ways, then we must model that belief with our own lives.

When we talk about modeling with our own lives The Prince of Peace, what we are talking about is, how do we cultivate a faith for the long haul, and how do we nurture and sustain a faith under incredible pressures, under world pressures that tell us to abandon our faith, to abandon the fundamentals of what Jesus came to teach us.

A Christian blogger by the name of Richard Dahlstrom gives us three examples of how we can nurture our faith for the long haul. He says, first of all, for the long haul we need to have consistency. We need good faith habits. We need to keep showing up for the conversation with God. We need to keep praying. We need to keep studying. We need to keep learning and meditating. We need to find quiet time for our lives. We need to keep worshipping.

At AA meetings, they often end their meetings by saying “Keep coming back. Keep coming back because if you are not sure about things today, at the next meeting, at the next worship service you may grow in your faith”, so consistency is part of our long haul faith community. For the long haul we need an ethic of don’t try this at home. Faith is not a solo endeavor. We cannot live the ways of Christ without support. Being part of a supportive faith community is critical because we need the strength of each other. We need the encouragement of each other. We need the wisdom of each other, and we need the struggles of each other. To walk in the footsteps of The Prince of Peace, we need help, we need community and we need church.

Thirdly, Richard Dahlstrom suggested that we need for the long haul of faith active engagement. We need to live out our faith in the world, perhaps the hardest thing to do. This idea of a privatized faith is heretical. Our faith was always meant to be lived out in the public square. When we are engaged with God, we are always alert for God’s next step in our lives. God has a next step for each and every one of us. God wants to direct us in new directions. God is alive and well and still speaking, and we need to be alert and engaged with the spirit of God because God has a new path always ready for us. This engagement includes having hearts of expectation and eyes to see. Christians, if nothing else, are to be people of hope, people who expect something new to happen at any moment and are prepared.

Our faith story tells us that, when Jesus came into the world, it was a dark and cold night, that Jesus was born into a dark and cold world, and that His life would be temporarily extinguished by the religious and earthly powers of His day. The earthly and religious powers of the world continue to do battle, but in the midst of those battles, in the midst of the ever-present darkness that surrounds us, the call of The Prince of Peace remains the same. The Prince of Peace said it again and again in what He taught, what He spoke and what He lived—to love your neighbor, to love your enemy, to do good to those who persecute you, and with The Prince of Peace by our side for the long haul of faith, we believe that all things are possible. All things are possible if we are consistent in our habits, if we don’t succumb to the temptation to go it alone, and if we remain engaged with God and the world. Advent and Christmas is a wonderful time to recommit to a faith for the long haul to The Prince of Peace, to Jesus Christ. Amen.