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12/10/17--University Presbyterian Church
Mark 3:1-6; Mark 8:31-38; Mark 11:15-19

FAUX PEACE ON EARTH VS. RIGHTEOUS CONFLICT

As I decorated our Christmas tree this week, I took stock of the various ornaments as we hung them on the tree. There were handmade ornaments created by the children over the years, and glittery balls, and a whole lot stars and angels. And there was also a dove. Doves of course are the symbol of peace and they show up in various places during the Christmas season. I would expect that in the cards I will receive during the course of this season, there will be at least one with the image of a dove on the cover with the words inside, "Peace on Earth." Peace has become an integral component to our celebration of Christmas. The scriptural basis for this no doubt arises from the passage in Luke's gospel where the heavenly band of angels announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, proclaiming "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." (Luke 2:14) We recognize in the birth of Jesus, God's desire to bring peace to the inhabitants of the earth.

This theme of peace envelopes both the religious as well as the secular celebrations of Christmas. So many of our hymns and holiday songs speak of the peace that comes with the season. Serene pictures of the little town of Bethlehem bathed in gentle light or of snug snow-covered cottages with smoke curling from the chimney adorn our Christmas cards. In television advertisements, we are shown scenes of happy family reunions and beautiful children laughing and enjoying one another. Our Christmas Eve worship services are designed to be peace-filled experiences with candle light and quiet songs. The television Christmas programs also reveal our desire to hear stories about peace: about people coming together, overcoming alienation, reconciling. Perhaps a favorite such Christmas story is the one about the British and German

soldiers in World War I who called a Christmas Eve truce to their fighting and came out of their trenches to shake hands, share food, and sing Christmas carols. We are touched by these stories of peace. We want Christmas to be a season of harmony and so we put a lot of effort and focus in creating an atmosphere of peace during the holidays.

However, scratch the surface of this warm holiday harmony, and we may discover that this peace amounts to nothing more than a thin veneer that is easily peeled away. The realities of our lives typically do not match the peace-filled propaganda we find in the holiday images and messages. Instead of joy and good cheer as we join in holiday family gatherings, our teeth may be clinched and our stomachs tied in knots as we endure the complexities of family dynamics and fractured histories. Lasting family peace may elude us and it may only be a matter of time before we, like those British and German soldiers of World War I, once again pick up our weapons of anger, division, and hostility. The avalanche of charitable activities carried out by corporations and businesses, churches and community groups during the holidays--"angel trees," toy drives, holiday food baskets--garner a lot of public attention for those few weeks but do not continue with the same vigor after the holidays and generally fail to address long-term economic needs. Some individuals, weighed down by their own struggles, or pain, or loss, drop out of sight altogether during the holidays. The holiday atmosphere of peace and joy proves too taxing for them and they can't bring themselves to pretend that all is well in their lives.

In truth, all is not well in most of our lives or in our world and quite often the peace we attempt to create at Christmas and the peace we embrace during the rest of the year is not genuine. It is a *faux* peace--*faux* being the French word for "fake" or "imitation." Like faux pearls, or faux furs, or faux leather, sometimes the peace we settle for is a fake product. We settle for this fake product because sometimes we would rather accept a comforting lie than the

uncomfortable truth. The comforting lies we tell ourselves might be that our marriage is not in trouble, or that we don't have a problem with alcohol and could quit at any time we want. And sometimes the lies that afford us a kind of faux peace are told to us by society at large: that lasting peace can come through military might and nuclear armaments, or that our society affords equal opportunity to all our citizens, or as when happened after the election of the first African American president, many white people told themselves that we had become a "post-racial" America and our race issues were finally behind us. African Americans of course, knew this to be an utterly false belief, a delusional belief, one that permitted white America to once again ignore the deep racial inequalities within our nation. Such comforting lies permit us to embrace a faux peace, a fake peace--at least for the moment.

Sometimes the faux peace is disrupted by some kind of event that forces us to face the uncomfortable truths--like the #ME TOO movement of women breaking the silence around their situations of sexual abuse by powerful men, or the white supremacy march in Charlottesville, or the cases of police abuse of unarmed African Americans. And those of us who have swallowed the lie of the faux peace message are left shocked and bewildered by the truths that are suddenly revealed to us in such events.

The birth of Jesus is indeed about peace on earth, but not the kind of faux peace we tend to celebrate at Christmas or that we often accept during the rest of the year. Ironically, we can learn something significant about the Christmas message of genuine peace from the Gospel of Mark--a gospel that offers no account of Jesus' birth and which is quite frankly a book that is far from peaceful. In fact, Mark's gospel is a book that describes a series of escalating conflicts that keep building right up to the climactic conflict of the crucifixion. At just about every turn in Mark's gospel, Jesus is involved in some kind of conflict: exorcising demons from the people

they possess, criticizing the religious leaders of his community, and even clashing with his own disciples. And Jesus isn't always the instigator. Sometimes the conflict arises because the religious leaders are upset with Jesus for things he did or did not do: healing on the Sabbath, teaching messages about the kingdom of God that offended them, and because Jesus associated with and affirmed the value of those considered to be the "wrong" kinds of people. Mark's gospel is a tension-filled book, and reading it is like being a guest in someone's home and witnessing a brewing fight between two family members that just keeps ratcheting up.

It would seem contradictory, therefore, to claim that a book so filled with conflict could offer us a meaningful message about peace. Such confusion, however, reveals our own misunderstandings about the nature of conflict. Conflict is not by definition hate-filled. Conflict results when you have two opposing forces. Two opposing forces could be a couple disagreeing over which movie to watch, or disputes between Israelis and Palestinians over their sacred homeland, or Jesus and the way of light over against the way of darkness. The conflict that arises in Mark is due to Jesus' unwavering commitment to the realm of God and the peace that God intends for all humanity.

The biblical understanding of peace was much broader than merely the absence of violence. The kind of peace called for by the biblical prophets, *shalom*, included the presence of justice and economic wellbeing for all. True peace was not possible where there was hunger or neglect, great disparities of wealth, or indifference to human suffering. The Jesus we encounter in Mark's gospel proclaims God's peace in all he does and in all he says. He is a truth teller. Like many truth tellers before him and after him, his adherence to the truth--to God's truth--puts him in conflict with all the opposing forces of the world. The picture we have of Jesus from Mark's gospel is a man living in integrity--in the purest form of that word. His commitment to

God's truth, to God's way, to God's love for you and me and every person on this earth, will not be divided or compromised. Jesus pursues God's peace with integrity and that propels him into situations of conflict with those forces that oppose the way of God.

What are these opposing forces? In the first chapter of Mark, just after Jesus is baptized, he goes out into the wilderness where scripture tells us he was "tempted by Satan." Satan does not necessarily mean a man with horns and a pitch fork. It may be helpful to use here another term for Satan: the anti-Christ. The word "anti" means against. What if we think of Satan, the anti-Christ as anything that is the opposite of the way of Christ, the way of God. Hatred, cruelty, abuse, greed. These are anti-Christ tendencies. Jesus' very first conflict in the Gospel of Mark is with the anti-Christ forces within himself, the forces that would tempt him to be something other than who God has called him. And then, the rest of Mark's gospel is the story of Jesus confronting these opposing forces in the rest of us.

In the first reading today, Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand. With this disability, he would have been considered unclean, a sinner, and would have been marginalized in his society. Jesus desires to heal this man but there's a problem: it's the sabbath day. And the rules dictate that no work should be done on the sabbath. Jesus knows that the religious leaders are just waiting to see if he will violate the law, so he asks them, "Is it lawful to do good or do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But the leaders remain silent. And Jesus, we are told "looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart." The leaders cared more about maintaining a rule than extending compassion. Jesus goes ahead and bears witness to the truth of God, to the truth of compassion and love, by healing the man. We might contemplate the ways our hearts are sometimes hardened in the face of human need, and the rules of our day--whether legal or merely social conventions--that conspire to keep some people

oppressed. Jesus confronts these anti-Christ forces within us, teaching us what God's true peace looks like.

In Mark chapter 8, Jesus clashes with his disciple Peter after Jesus says the Messiah will be rejected and suffer and be killed. Peter doesn't like this message. Peter, like many of us, is attracted to power in the form of coercive strength and might. He desired a Messiah who would exercise such might to overthrow the Romans and make Israel great again. But Jesus confronts this falsehood about who the Messiah is called to be. God's strength will be revealed in humility, in sacrifice, and in love. And then Jesus adds, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me." To achieve the peace that Jesus brings the world, you and I, his followers, are called to live out God's truth, rooted in justice and compassion. And a person really can't walk *that* path in life without encountering the opposing forces of the world.

The story from Mark chapter 11 of Jesus overturning the money changers' tables in the temple offers us perhaps the most obvious example of Jesus engaged in conflict. Money changers were a necessary feature of the temple, for many pilgrims came to Jerusalem from countries far away and needed to change their money into a currency that could be used in the temple. Jesus' issue with the temple likely lay in its economic policies and practices that were exploitive and unfairly burdened the poor. Jesus drives out the money changers stating, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations . . . But you have made it a den of robbers." Theft of the little man and woman at the hands of the powerful was the underlying issue. We may ponder our own institutions of power, especially our Congress as it currently works out the details of a tax bill, and the ways such policies can benefit the wealthy and be

economically unjust to people of low income. Jesus confronted the unjust economic practices, these anti-Christ practices, that made genuine peace impossible.

Over and over again, Jesus confronts the anti-Christ forces of the world that thwart God's desire for authentic peace. And he calls his disciples, you and me, and says, "follow me." That does not mean that we need to barge into our family gatherings this holiday and call out our relatives for their bad behavior. Perhaps the most important place for us to begin our truth-telling is with ourselves. Immediately after Jesus confronts Satan in the wilderness, he begins going about preaching to the people, declaring, "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." In other words, the first act of conflict by Jesus after his own conflict with himself, his very first conflict in this book filled with conflict, is him facing off with you and me. There he stands in front of you, in front of me, and he says "repent." Repentance--that is another way of calling us to confront the truth about our own darkness, and the opposing forces within us that stand in the way of authentic peace: our self-destructive habits of over-eating, over-drinking, over-spending, our selfishness, our pride, our greed, the ways we cause hurt, the ways we demean others in our thoughts and in our actions, the ways we accommodate injustice because the status quo benefits us in some way. The peace we desire to have in our lives and in our world begins when we tell the truth about ourselves.

The Gospel of Mark is the story of Jesus bringing peace to the world--not an easy peace, not a magical Christmas miracle kind of peace that warms our hearts, but an authentic peace that is hard won, hard work, and quite often uncomfortable. The gift of peace God desires most to give the world and to give you personally is not a fake product but the real deal, the genuine article, the gift that keeps on giving.