

## “Good Will to All”

Rev. Debra P. Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Christmas Eve, December 2015 (Year C)

Isaiah 52:7-10      Luke 2:8-20

Most of you know that Tom and I traveled to Japan for two weeks this fall. We received a generous welcome in churches and Christian schools, and had a wonderful time visiting castles, and Shinto and Buddhist Temples. Japan is a beautiful country with a history of deep spirituality. We also visited the Edo Museum of the City of Tokyo and, of course, the Peace Museum in Hiroshima. And we saw the devastating effects of the bombing campaigns and atomic bombs, and the subsequent fires and disease of World War II. After the war the United Nations was formed, with the great hope of being able to prevent disputes from turning again to war. But the temptation to fight for power is too great. There has never been a lasting end to war.

When Jesus was born, the Romans believed that the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had brought everlasting peace and prosperity to the world. His victories had ended 100 years of civil war in Rome, and his subjects called him Lord, the Bringer of Peace, the Savior of the World, even the Son of God. After he died, they worshipped him as a god. But Caesar Augustus did not bring peace to everyone. A few years after Jesus was born, the Romans put down an uprising in a city near Jesus' home, by sending in 20,000 troops, killing the opposition, burning the city to the ground, and raping and enslaving the rest of the population. And this was typical.\* The Romans may have brought peace for some, but not for those who objected to Roman rule, or lived in the wrong place at the wrong time. The rulers of the world may bring a temporary semblance of peace through victory in war. But God brings peace based on justice and love.

Anne read from the gospel of Luke tonight, the angel's message to Mary, who told Mary Jesus would be called “Son of God” and of his kingdom there would be no end. And KJ read the song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among people.” Caesar Augustus had his Roman legions. Jesus had a multitude of the heavenly host, an army of angels. And like Caesar, Jesus was called Son of God, Prince of Peace, the Savior of the World.

But this was a different kind of Lord and Savior. Jesus was born of humble parents, and laid in a lowly manger. And as he began his public ministry, he renounced any temptation to seek authority and power over the kingdoms of this world (Luke 4:5-7). He rode on a donkey instead of in a chariot, and never touched a sword in battle. His sword was the Word of God, the words of truth. And the peace he brought was based in justice and goodwill among people.

We gather this night to celebrate the birth of the true Prince of Peace, the one who calls us to follow in the way of God and be people of goodwill. There is a great need for peace and goodwill in our world today, full of racial and religious tension, prejudice, hate crimes and war. And every little gesture counts. Some of you just volunteered in the Family Promise Homeless shelter, during one of the busiest weeks of the year. Others of you help to teach day laborers their rights, and help collect their unpaid wages. You welcome people from other countries and help them learn English. You are generous with each other and give generously to the church and other organizations that help people in need, or work for peace and justice.

I read this month of a professor at Wheaton College, a Christian College in Illinois, who decided to wear a head scarf at work, in airplanes and at social events during Advent this year as an act of devotion to Christ, showing her concern and care for peace-loving Muslims who have

been bullied and threatened in response to the events in San Bernardino. There are many ways to follow in the path of the Prince of Peace, to choose love instead of fear, and to bless instead of curse.

I thank you for coming here tonight and choosing to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, the message of Emmanuel, God with us. May God have mercy on this world. And may we do our part to spread the news the angels bring – news of great joy, news of peace and goodwill to all on earth. Amen.

\*Credit to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in The First Christmas, What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth, Harper Collins, N.Y. 2007.