

The Reverend Kirk T. Berlenbach
Christmas, Year B
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The early spring wind was cold as I spoke the words of dismissal from the graveside. The mourners were dispersing. Some gathered in small groups to talk. Others headed straight for their cars. A few remained looking at the grave, freshly covered with the flowers. As I was walking away Charlie came up to me. We had just buried his mother but he had yet to show any real emotion. He stood beside me, looked back at the grave and said, "Well at least she's at peace. It's a shame that you have to die in order to find peace." He paused and after a moment his eyes met mine. He held my gaze then said, "I have to die in order to find peace." The frankness and conviction of his words stunned me and before I could respond Charlie turned and quickly walked away.

"I have to die in order to find peace." What a concise statement of utter despair. His words could not stand in starker contrast to those of the Christmas angels who proclaim to the shepherds in the field "Peace on earth." Yet I imagine their promise, which holds hope for so many of us, offers no encouragement for Charlie. Peace and good will stand at the core of what this night is supposed to be about. But what does Christmas have to offer someone who feels only sorrow... who knows only guilt without hope of reconciliation... conflict without resolution, fear without comfort, suffering without relief? Right now, as we sit with family and friends sharing the beauty of this night and the promise of renewal found in the story of the Christ Child, the Charlie's of this world sit alone, or on a bar stool or quietly in the corner as the rest of their family talks and laughs around them.

If the peace of Christmas is going to make any real difference for Charlie, or for that matter, for any of us, then it has to be more than just a warm feeling. That is asking a lot from a day which has become far more focused on gifts and decorations than it is on any kind of spiritual substance. If we're lucky Christmas is a day or maybe even a week that helps us forget our troubles. But in the long run what difference does it really make?

The hard truth is that even with Christmas we don't get to experience much peace in this life. Come tomorrow we will still have anxious hearts and troubled sleep. And even though its Christmas hundreds of thousands will still take up arms to kill one another in the name of country, tribe or god. Once you strip away the sentiment you have to wonder if Christmas offers any real hope for peace at all?

It seems that lasting peace is beyond our ability to create on our own. Is it any wonder then that we look to G-D in order to find it. So why doesn't G-D make good on the promise of the angels? Why doesn't G-D give us the peace that we long for? Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places. The Christmas angels proclaim peace on earth. Not peace in some distant heaven or peace at some future time or even the promise of peace when you die... they proclaim peace right here and right now. It may sound too good to be true, but the peace we hope for is not to be found "out there." It is to be found here... in our lives, exactly as we are.

The fact that such a divine quality can be found in flesh and blood seems contradictory. But that is the whole point of the Incarnation. Remember, the angels don't ask the shepherds just to take their word for it... they offer a sign that the peace of G-D has already come into being. And that proof is not found in their glory and power... it is found in a manger. By being born as one of us G-D is no longer limited to just being out there- G-D and the peace that G-D offers us is already with us... in us... waiting to be discovered.

That's no easy thing to accept. We are so flawed it is hard to imagine anything so divine as peace could be found in us. It is so much more familiar to talk about G-D as being "up there." But so long as we look for peace beyond this life we miss the point. Our deliverance comes not from a G-D who is "up there." It comes from a G-D who is present with us- who shares our struggles and feels our pain. As a result the peace that so eludes us can be found right here, in this tangled mess that is our life.

Once we begin to understand where to look, the peace of Christmas becomes so much more than a simple platitude. Our lives and our world may be anything but peaceful yet because G-D now shares our life with us we have the chance to actually experience peace here on earth. More than just a feeling, no longer just a dream, peace is the very real possibility of transformation and fulfillment.

So what stands between you and that peace? What keeps you from feeling the tranquility and well being that you long for? Maybe you feel like Charlie- trapped without hope or prospects for freedom- a slave to fear or to guilt or to compulsion. Maybe the worry caused by your job or your debts seems so overwhelming that you don't think you can ever know a decent night's sleep again. Maybe the pressures of life keep you in such a constant state of anxiety that you can't manage to relax even for a minute.

But what if you stopped focusing on those obstacles and instead turned your attention to what might be possible instead? What if you stopped dwelling on what might have been and instead turned your focus on what could be? What if you stopped obsessing over those things or people that you never had control of in the first place and instead turned your attention to those things that you actually can change? Or, and perhaps most importantly, what if you stopped trying to fill the holes in your heart with things that can never truly satisfy and instead looked out towards the needs of those around you?

That is the surest path to peace. Ironically, it can be easier to help someone else find it than it is to find it ourselves. Think about it... if you looked past your own anxiety and pain and instead reached out to others... if you spoke a kind word or took the time to listen to their troubles... if you offered them hospitality or even just a little company, think of the peace you might help them find. I can't help but wonder what difference even just a small act of concern might have made for Charlie?

It isn't easy. Our worries can be all consuming. But if you set your own quest for peace aside in order to help someone else find it for themselves, then you will begin to understand just what peace on earth is all about. Real and lasting peace depends not just on your stress or frame of mind or your blood pressure... it depends on whether or not those around us know it too. Peace comes into being one moment, one life, one act of kindness at a time. And until all of us know it, none of us truly will.

Tonight the Christmas angels once again proclaim their wonderful message. But their peace is not rooted in the dream of a distant heaven or lost in the mist of history... it is to be found here and now. That means whatever your problems, no matter how overwhelming your worries, you still have hope. G-D has come among us so that you can find peace in this life. Yet to fully enjoy this incredible gift, you have to share it. For only by helping others find it can we know it ourselves. This Christmas I pray that you will share whatever peace you find so that Charlie and all those like him may finally come to know it too.