

Church of the Crossroads  
Christmas Eve  
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## ON EARTH, PEACE

Once again, my sisters and brothers, we have heard the message of the angel:

“Fear not, for behold, I am bringing you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord. . .

Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace, goodwill among people.

On earth, peace—is it possible? We need only recall an event that has captured the imaginations of people for decades. It was a truce between British and German soldiers that took place in 1914 during the First World War.<sup>1</sup> The truce began on Christmas Eve, when German troops began decorating the area around their trenches in the region of Ypres, Belgium, for Christmas. They began by placing candles on trees, then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols—especially *Stille Nacht-Silent Night*. The British troops in the trenches across from them responded by singing English carols.

The two sides started to call out Christmas greetings to each other. Soon thereafter, there were calls for visits across the “No Man’s Land” where small gifts were exchanged—whisky, jam, cigars, chocolate, and the like. The artillery in the region fell silent that night. The truce also allowed a breathing spell where recently-fallen soldiers could be brought back behind their lines by burial parties. Proper burials took place as soldiers from both sides mourned the dead together. At one funeral, soldiers from both sides gathered and read the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: “*The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me*

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<sup>1</sup> The details of this truce can be found on the Internet under *Wikipedia*.

*beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."*

The truce spread to other areas of the lines. Even football games were played. In many sectors, the truce lasted through Christmas Night, but in some areas, it continued until New Year's Day. The truce occurred in spite of opposition at higher levels of the military. In subsequent years, most of these truces were forbidden, but some occurred spontaneously, nonetheless.

This story illustrates the stark contrast between the ways of God and the ways of nations and empires. Empires and nations always wage war in order to gain peace. Then, what we are left with is *pax Romana*, *pax Britania*, or *pax Americana*. The peace of nations and empires is gained through dominance and violence. The peace of God comes by another way. It comes through compassion and mercy. It comes by way of a helpless child, born in an animal shed and laid in a feeding trough. *"And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."*

It is a very different story, this story of Christmas. Those German and British troops during World War I embodied the story. They stopped the war-making, and made themselves as vulnerable as the helpless child. Can you imagine taking the step to venture out into a "no man's land" in order to greet your enemy? But that is exactly what must be done if God's peace is to be embodied in our world. Human beings, collectively, will have to set aside their thirst for power and dominance, and learn to live together as kindred, reaching across the divisions that keep people apart.

Human beings will also have to set aside their fear, as did those British and German soldiers on Christmas Eve, 1914. Fear is the great enemy of God's peace, for it is fear that leads to violence. It is fascinating that the command to "fear not" appears so frequently in the Christmas story. The Angel Gabriel tells Mary to "fear not." Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is also instructed by an angel to "fear not." Joseph, in the Gospel of Matthew, is told by an angel to "fear not." The same command is given to the terrified shepherds, "Fear not, for behold, I am bringing you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

And so it was that those German and British troops had to let go of their fear in order to embody the peace God gives. Is it possible? Is it possible in an American culture that seems to worship fear? Perhaps. One thing we do know: history is on the side of God's peace. In the history of the world, there is not an empire that has survived. The Roman Empire under which Jesus was born came to an end. So did the British Empire. And so will the American Empire. In the end empires become self-destructive. The peace that is gained through violence and dominance turns out to be no peace at all. In the words of this year's Christmas message from our Palestinian friends at the Sabeel Institute:

Ultimately, peace will come not from the Caesars and all those who trust in their military might and in the arrogance of their power but from the meek that put their trust in God. It is the meek who will inherit the earth. Peace will come from the labor, toil, and hard work of all those who do not glory in their riches or in their power but glory in their love and service of God and in their love and acceptance of others.

These are words that come to us from an oppressed people living under occupation. These words come to us this night from Palestinians living in Bethlehem, the birth place of the Christ Child.

On earth, peace—is it possible? Tonight, we want to believe it is. The story of Christ's birth is a story that may not be heard by empires and nations, but it is a story that can be heard by us as it was heard by those British and German Soldiers nearly one hundred years ago. Let us keep that story from World War 1 in our own hearts. Let us be willing to become as vulnerable as those soldiers became and take the risk of embodying the peace of God given to us and to the world tonight. And let us, as those soldiers did, let go of our fear that we may live joyously and courageously as brothers and sisters, one with another, faithfully witnessing for God's peace and God's justice in this, our world. So may it be this night, and always. Amen.