

**Peace on Earth, Good Will to All People**  
**Nancy DiTomaso, December 27, 2015**

Although I have attended church for most of my life, there was a brief period when I didn't come to church. That was when I first moved from Bound Brook to Fanwood, around the time that my first daughter, Jessica, was born. I had been attending the Presbyterian Church in Bound Brook, and an incident at the church upset me. During one Sunday, a stranger came into the church and sat toward the front of the church. The stranger had on a hat, something like a cowboy hat, but made of leather. I was sitting in the balcony of the church, so able to see what was going on. I was astounded that when the minister noticed this man, who had clearly never been to the church before, the minister stopped his sermon, walked down from the pulpit, and asked the man to remove his hat, which he did. After the service was over, the man quickly left and never returned to the church. I was appalled that the minister felt the need to call attention to this man's difference and to make it clear that he was not welcome in the church unless he conformed to expected norms or conventions.

So when I moved to Fanwood, not out of any conscious decision, I didn't look for a new church, and I ended up not attending church for about six months. But I found that I was frequently having disturbing dreams, and one morning, I woke up after dreams that were scary and violent, and I remember having in my head when I woke up, "Peace on earth, good will to all people." Since then, this theme has been important to me, and I often write it on the weekly attendance sheets for the second service.

But it was not until I was asked to share this message with you that I thought more carefully about the association of "Peace on earth" with Christmas. And when I began to look into it and read about the Biblical texts that talk about peace, I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of the mandate for Peace in the Christmas story and the call to Christians.

We read just some of the Bible verses that talk about peace from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, which is often quoted at Christmas, because it is thought to foretell the birth of Jesus. And also, of course, in the Angel's song at the birth of Jesus.

There are other parts of the Bible that talk about peace as well, in the Psalms, and in Paul's letters. Of course, we celebrate the importance of peace every Sunday, during the ritual of "Passing the Peace." And many services often end with a Benediction from Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

When Christians think about peace, though, they often think of it as internal peace, or sometimes, as in our weekly ritual, as interpersonal peace among friends.

The Biblical passages that link peace to Christmas, though, are much broader, and more about peace between groups of people, and even between nations. As Christians, we have an obligation to further peace toward all, and not just toward those who look like us, act like us, or dress and behave like us. And peaceful attitudes and behaviors are not limited to those who have the same values and who think like us.

So let me talk a bit about what I learned when looking into the meaning of peace in the prophecies about Jesus and in the celebration of Jesus's birth.

The book of the Prophet Isaiah covers a period from the Eighth to the Sixth centuries BC, when Isaiah expressed strong words of judgment because the Jewish people were rebellious against God and unwilling to repent. Their sin, according to some commentaries, was their injustice toward their neighbors and the growing inequality in which the poor were being oppressed.

The passage in Isaiah's prophecy that there will be a child born who will be "Prince of Peace" took place at the time that the Jewish people were divided into two different kingdoms, one of Israel and one of Judah. Isaiah was speaking to the king of Judah, Ahaz, because Israel had formed a coalition with Syria to fight an expected invasion by Assyria, and Israel was trying to force Ahaz and Judah to join the coalition. Isaiah told his King not to do so, but instead to trust God for deliverance, which Ahaz refused. Ahaz didn't listen, Assyria ended up taking over Judah and Israel, and then Babylonia conquered Assyria along with Jerusalem. The temple at Jerusalem was destroyed, and many Jews were taken captive to Babylon.

So the prophecy that there will be a child born who would become the "Prince of Peace," speaks directly to the fear of wars, foreign aggression, and the response to growing inequality, oppression of the poor, and the role of justice in the daily lives of the people.

The amazing imagery from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, which is called "The Peaceful Kingdom," should give us all pause and tell us something about what peace should mean within the Christmas message and the Christian experience. Mortal enemies should live together, wolves with lambs, calves with lions, and young children with snakes. The passage should remind us of the Garden of Eden when the snake led Adam and Eve to be cast out. Isaiah says that peace will be made even with snakes, and lions, and wolves. The passage says, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." In other words, peace is possible even with the most unlikely.

Similarly, we should think about the context of the birth of Jesus and the Angel's song about "Peace on earth and good will to all." Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor (following the demise of the Roman Republic). This was a period that was celebrated as the "Pax Romana," The Roman Peace. The period was called this because the Empire of Rome was thought of as stable and secure. But that does not mean that there was no fighting going on. There was fighting across the borders of the Empire, and the stability of the empire was held together through oppression and violence. But from the point of view of Roman citizens, there was peace and prosperity for them. Those in the conquered lands did not have the same view, including in Galilee and Judea. Some scholars now think that Luke wrote his version of the Christmas story to deliberately contrast Jesus's birth in Bethlehem with the brutality and violence of the Roman Empire.

In this context, the Angels tell us that Jesus's birth should lead to "Peace on earth, and good will toward all people." (Note that some later translations, talk of good will toward those whom God favors. But doesn't God favor everyone? Doesn't God want peace toward all? I am convinced that the mandate is much broader, to Jews and Gentiles, as we learn in the Book of Acts, which is

thought, by the way, to be written by the same person who wrote the Book of Luke.) Also note that the angels declared peace on earth to shepherds in the fields. One commentary I read said that shepherds were of such low status, that one would not want one for a neighbor and would not want your sister to marry one. In other words, peace is for all.

In Jesus's life and ministry we see some of the meaning of peace and good will toward all. Toward little children, toward those afflicted and outcast, toward the discredited. And note that in the Gospel of Luke, in response to a question to Jesus of "Who is my neighbor," Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. That is, the man from a group despised by the Jews who shows caring and risks his own life for an injured Jew who had been robbed and beaten. In this response, as well as in others, Jesus is telling us that we are to be peaceful toward both those in our own group and those whom we might think of as strangers, or outsiders, or as infidels, or outcasts.

Peace on earth and good will toward all does not have limits or borders or conditions in the eyes of God. We are to love one another and our neighbor as ourselves, and Jesus tells us that our neighbors are the most unlikely people, those whom we despise, those whom we fear, those whom we do not feel are like us.

So does this mean that Christians must be pacifists and never undertake military service or to fight back? Does it mean that Christians have to support peace at all costs?

No, it doesn't. Years of philosophy and ethics have developed what is called Just War Theory to define the conditions under which it is ethical to fight. That is, it outlines a set of conditions about when it is considered a moral act to engage in war, including having a just cause, it being a last resort, declared by a proper authority, undertaken for the right intentions, having a reasonable chance of success, and being proportional as a response to the offense. There are conditions as well about what are acceptable ways to fight and to end wars.

I won't get into the specifics of Just War Theory, but both the historical context of the Isaiah prophecies and of the century around the birth of Jesus give us some guidelines about when Christians can engage in behaviors that are not peaceful. First and foremost, they must be with the intention of bringing about lasting peace among people. Second, and perhaps as important, especially with regard to Isaiah's prophecies, Christians should fight against oppression and the violation of the poor, the innocent, and those who are too weak to fight for themselves. Only after we turn our cheeks seventy times seven times.

But it is never moral to fight out of self-interest, self-aggrandizement, nor to right a personal offense, or to take advantage of others.

I now understand something that puzzled me in childhood. When I was young, I sometimes had fights with my sister who was just a year older than I was. Sometimes these were actual fights where we would hit each other, although I don't think that happened often. But at the time, I wondered why my sister felt the need to retaliate if I hit her? Why didn't she just turn the other cheek, the way the Bible said she should?

Now I see that “Peace on earth” is not one-sided. Christians, like the people of Judea at the time of Isaiah’s prophecies, cannot claim “Peace on earth” if they are the ones who engage in the exploitation or oppression of others or who do harm to others. Peace on earth is for those who first repent and trust in the Lord. Then we can experience peace on earth.

The Christmas story tells us that we must further the cause of peace, in our own lives, in our relationships with others, between and among groups that differ from us, and between nations. The whole world is our neighbor, and we must love them as ourselves.