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Plymouth Congregational UCC

Transforming Peace

Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122

I love this season. I'm a believer in tradition and a sucker for nostalgia.

And there is no other time of year that offers a better playground for both.

We have family traditions and church traditions and town traditions and national traditions all packed into these weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. I find it both exhausting and exhilarating!

Nostalgia and tradition can bring out the best in people.

Some of us get in touch with folks we haven't talked to all year.

Some of us reconnect with our roots.

Some of us sing sappy songs of Christmas cheer that bring us back to our childhoods.

Nostalgia and tradition can also – using Hal's phrase of the week – help us get our knickers in a knot when we dare to mess with such sacred things as colored lights in downtown displays.

Where is the Great Arbiter when needed?

For out of Zion will go forth instruction... God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples.

If only we could have had God's perspective – the God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar – when contemplating our city's interfaith holiday expressions.

Then perhaps we could have collectively beaten our swords into plowshares and our editorials into greeting cards.

Even in this season of peace, nostalgia and tradition can be a double-edged plowshare.

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In their latest book, [The First Christmas](#), John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg examine the scriptural passages surrounding Jesus' birth. As you might remember, Matthew and Luke are the only places in the Bible where Jesus' early life is mentioned – and the two tellings are quite distinct:

Matthew gives us Wise Men from the East,

while Luke celebrates Mary's angelic visitation and shepherds abiding in the fields.

But storyline technicalities don't seem to matter to us at this time of year:

we want to hear the *whole* story as we remember it, angels and shepherds and wise men all together.

Crossan and Borg describe the way many Christians experience this broader story:

The accounts of Jesus' birth, they write, "are often sentimentalized. And, of course, there is an emotional power in them. They touch the deepest of human yearnings: for light in the darkness, for the fulfillment of our hopes, for a different kind of world. Moreover, for many Christians, they are associated with their earliest memories of childhood. Christmas has emotional power"<sup>1</sup>.

When we hear today's reading from Isaiah, it often evokes similar seasonal emotion.

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

Who wouldn't long for such a vision of a JustPeace to become reality?

Even the staid stoics among us can respond with appreciation for the thought.

But of course, we live in this world, and that lovely idea of peace has proven impossible over and over again.

Rev. Thomas Warren, bible study contributor for the *United Church News*, lovingly describes Isaiah's words as utter absurdity. He recounts: "Isaiah's time was... a time of wars and rumors of wars. It was a time when *real* leaders spoke only of national defense, homeland security, and God's favoritism. It was a time when only fools spoke of peace. Isaiah was one such fool".

Warren continues, “In some ways, not much has changed. Perhaps it’s only gotten worse. For ours is a time not of war, but of multiple wars. Ours is a time not simply of rumors, but of overt threats and pre-emptive strikes. Ours is a time of shadow-dwelling insurgents and an imperial bully with global reach”<sup>ii</sup>.

There doesn’t seem to be much room for nostalgia in our time.

And in fact, it does feel foolish to preach peace when “real leaders” (and perhaps our own innate skepticism) tell us that peace is impossible.

Yet it is also impossible for us to simply rid the poetry of Isaiah’s words from our heart’s yearning:

*nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

And equally impossible to erase the song of the Psalmist:

*For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.”*

*For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.*

And so we are brought firmly into the visceral and paradoxical experience that is Advent.

This is a time of year when life expands to bursting:

bible readings speak of plowshares from swords;

Mary’s pregnant song of redemption;

the long-awaited root of Jesse’s lineage;

a voice crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord;

the wolf dwelling with the lamb;

and us awaiting a wonderful counselor, a prince of peace....

These readings help spark in us a longing for that peace within so that we might actually get to experience a tender and childlike Advent.

But then Crossan and Borg remind us – especially those of us who cherish nostalgia and tradition – that “the stories of Jesus’ birth are more than sentimental. The stories of the first Christmas are both personal and political. They speak of personal and political transformation”<sup>iii</sup>.

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One of the great, sentimentalized peace stories of the 20th century is that of the World War I Christmas Truce. While it may be familiar to some of you, younger generations don’t generally learn about this event. In fact, I don’t know that I would ever have heard it had it not been mythologically preserved by pop culture.

You may remember that Charles Schultz’s “Peanuts” comic strip included a series in which the beagle Snoopy adventured as a World War I flying ace – and he would go up against his particular foe, the Red Baron.

Well, in the ‘60s, a musical group called The Royal Guardsmen used the “Peanuts” character to reference the fabled Christmas Truce in their song “Snoopy’s Christmas”. The song continues to play on the radio this time of year; but for those of you who haven’t heard it, I’m going to get a bit sentimental on you ... and share the lyrics.

SNOOPY’S CHRISTMAS

by The Royal Guardsmen

The news it came out in the First World War
The bloody Red Baron was flying once more
The Allied Command ignored all of its men
And called on Snoopy to do it again

‘Twas the night before Christmas and forty below
When Snoopy went up in search of his foe
He spied the Red Baron and fiercely they fought
With ice on his wings, Snoopy knew he was caught

Christmas bells those Christmas bells
Ring out from the land
Asking peace of all the world
And good will to man

The Baron had Snoopy dead in his sights
He reached for the trigger to pull it up tight
Why he didn’t shoot, well, we’ll never know
Or was it the bells from the village below

Christmas bells those Christmas bells
 Ringing through the land
 Bringing peace to all the world
 And good will to man

The Baron then offered a holiday toast
 And Snoopy our hero saluted his host
 And then with a roar they were both on their way
 Each knowing they'd meet on some other day

The Baron made Snoopy fly to the Rhine
 And forced him to land behind the enemy lines
 Snoopy was certain that this was the end
 When the Baron cried out
 "Merry Christmas, mein friend!"

Christmas bells those Christmas bells
 Ring out from the land
 Asking peace of all the world
 And good will to man^v

I recognize the utter absurdity that we can combine
 the sentiment of a silly song
 with the harsh reality of a terrible war
 and the deep longing for unexpected peace.

This is the same absurdity that gets some of us up in arms about what holiday displays are allowed,
 and others of us angry if we dare deconstruct the various stories of Christmas.

But it's in that very combination, that paradox, that we find our faith.

One essayist reminds us that "the reality of the [1914] Christmas Truce...is a slightly less romantic and a more down to earth story. It was an organic affair that in some spots [along the Western Front] hardly registered a mention and in others left a profound impact upon those who took part.

"Today, pragmatists read the Truce as nothing more than a 'blip' – a temporary lull induced by the season of goodwill, but willingly exploited by both sides to better their defences and eye out one another's positions. Romantics [on the other hand] assert that the Truce was an effort by normal [people] to bring about an end to the slaughter".^v

So the Christmas Truce *did* happen, if not with all the mythology that now attaches to it. Soldiers' journals recount men in opposing trenches singing Christmas carols, each in their own language, but together. Perhaps they even shared a couple verses of our well-beloved Silent Night/*Stille Nacht*.

In the midst of a very real and very violent war, there actually existed some Christmas peace. *Absurd*.

Maybe it *was* just a "blip". But even knowing that our world continues to reject plowshares and pruning hooks in favor of swords and spears, we somehow still manage to sing the peace-filled, bursting-with-hope songs of Advent and Christmas.

Is that appropriate?

Is it faithful?

Is it as absurd as it seems?

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I have to share with you that this week I managed to work my own knickers into a knot when I came face to face with my deep down ideas about "appropriate" seasonal reflections.

On Thursday I received my copy of *United Church News*, the UCC's national newspaper.  
 What had me so annoyed is the front cover headline: "It's a '100 Grand' Christmas".

This is the feature article for Advent and Christmastide. For any unfamiliar with the project, the original goal was to gather 100 thousand signatures for peace. The momentum began at General Synod this summer when the UCC Collegium of Officers presented a Pastoral Letter on the Iraq War. Ever since, peace-with-justice-minded UCCers have been co-signing the letter to Congress, which encourages U.S. leaders to end the war.

I actually signed the letter several months ago, because it is one means of living out my faith in the world. And while the letter is important to me, my first response to the front page proclamation "It's a '100 Grand' Christmas"

was a firm:

“That’s NOT what Advent’s about! In my nostalgic tradition Advent is about preparing the way for the coming Messiah; it’s about starting the new church year with new hope for tomorrow; Advent is about lighting the wreath with the candles of hope and love and joy and peace ...  
...Oh yeah. *Peace.*”

I hate when I get caught in my own theological judgments.

I was actually annoyed that our United Church of Christ would dare to put *action* for PEACE out front and center for Advent and Christmas.

But action for peace is exactly what Isaiah calls us to do.

God will do the arbitrating, but the *peoples* shall beat their swords into plowshares.

The news article offered a deep reminder, as it quoted our General Minister and President John Thomas:

“Christmas is a time to embrace peace, to proclaim it not only in our worship, but to live it through our witness....While it might be tempting to take some ‘time off’ from our advocacy during the holidays, we mustn’t. The people most affected by this war – those displaced by the violence and those who serve in the military – certainly don’t have that luxury”.<sup>vi</sup>

So the “100 Grand” for Christmas campaign puts the peace we preach into action in 3 ways:

by seeking one hundred thousand prayers and letters for U.S. servicemen and women;  
one hundred thousand dollars for Iraq refugee aid and resettlement;  
and one hundred thousand in-district visits to Congressional offices.

The project gives us practical ways to walk our Advent peace talk.

This first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary of readings points us to these two texts:

Isaiah: *nation shall not lift up sword against nation,*  
and the Psalm: *For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.”*

With my nostalgia and tradition reflected in serene manger scenes and comforting carols, I tend to focus on the “peace be within you” part of our faith. But in order to truly enter the spirit of the season, peace must reach beyond us as well, and balance that internal longing with a focus on the “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” part also.

Any talk of peace can come out as utterly absurd.

But so, I might argue, is the idea of a child’s birth continuing to make an impact after 2 thousand years.

Yet here we are.

So *with* the prophet and the psalmist, I say: Peace be within you and within me; and peace be among the nations.

May we strive to make it so this year. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p. viii.

<sup>ii</sup> "Advent is time to proclaim 'the absurdity of Christ'" by Thomas Warren in *United Church News*, Vol.XXIII, No. 6, December/January 2008, p. A7.

<sup>iii</sup> *The First Christmas*, p. viii.

<sup>iv</sup> "Snoopy's Christmas" by The Royal Guardsmen, released 1967 on the album *Snoopy and His Friends*.

<sup>v</sup> "The Christmas Truce" by Simon Rees, on [www.firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.htm).

<sup>vi</sup> "Glory to God in the Highest and On Earth Peace: Can a Christmas Chorus of 100,000 Peacemakers make a difference?" by J. Bennett Guess in *United Church News*, Vol.XXIII, No. 6, December/January 2008, p. A8.