

Sermon for Sunday November 5, 2017
Remembrance Sunday McClure
Philippians 4:4-9

It seems every year that the push for the Christmas season to begin comes earlier and earlier. Retailers try to hold off till after Remembrance Day but they often fail miserably. After all - what do you put on all those bare shelves after Halloween? I don't often make it either. This year for the first time in several years I got to thinking about sending Christmas cards and Hallmark lured me in last week. There were lots of pretty options – Santa cards dominated the choices – lots of season's greetings - but if you look hard you can find the Merry Christmas kind. These often have lovely pastoral images on the front – often of a little baby lying quietly in a manger with two doting parents looking on in amazement. A particularly bright star shines over the little shed with less bright stars twinkling in the back ground. All seems peaceful and calm./// Clearly Hallmark has never read the Christmas story. For if you read the biblical story of Jesus birth then you know that the setting of his birth is not at all calm but rather it is sheer chaos.

It is true that Bethlehem was a sleepy little out of the way community and Jerusalem was the big city - the center of politics, finance, and religion. Jerusalem was a busy, vital city teeming with people and all the hustle and bustle, movement and energy that any big city can muster. But Bethlehem, as Micah put it, was 'small among the clans of Judah". It was more Outlook than Saskatoon. Not many people in Bethlehem and not much mischief to get into. So how could there have been chaos in Bethlehem.

There was chaos at that particular moment in history because the population of little Bethlehem had grown way past its capacity to house the people. Descendants from the house and lineage of David" had been forced to return to Bethlehem from all over the country in order to be registered. It was somewhat like taking a census, except the point of it was to make certain that no one escaped paying taxes. And those taxes were paid to Caesar - to the occupying forces that had invaded their land and were not merely unwelcome but actually despised by the people. And with good reason, because Rome and its soldiers liked to flex their muscles, they dominated the lives of the people who called Israel "Home". For the most part, those Roman invaders were oppressive and often abusive. And now hordes of people had been forced to come to little Bethlehem to register so that Caesar could find them and force them to pay homage **and** to pay taxes to an insufferable enemy. Strangers were everywhere. Soldiers were everywhere. There was chaos in Bethlehem.

Years before – at a similarly chaotic time of oppression and struggle, Jeremiah, a Hebrew prophet said "how can we sing of peace when there is no peace?" Well, there was no peace in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. But then, isn't that when a prince of peace is needed most of all, when there is no peace? That's the kind of world the Prince of peace was born into then and the kind of world that he is born into even still.

Every day we are bombarded with messages of chaos - threats and violence and fear. We hear about ISIS and alQuda and North Korea and Yeman and Iran and thousands of Syrian refugees seeking asylum from the terrors of their own nation. We

see Russia taking giant strides backward toward its cold war philosophy of oppression. In our own country we observe frightening gaps between the rich and the poor, aboriginal and non- aboriginal peoples. We see widespread abuse of the vulnerable, the very young, the differently abled and the very old. “How can we sing peace when there is no peace?”

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he understood the kind of world I just described. He knew what his friends in Philippi would soon face, and what they were already beginning to face - persecution and rejection because of their faith. Paul wrote the letter - that this morning’s passage was taken from, while he himself was confined to a Roman prison cell under the sentence of death because of his faith. He knew about bad times and chaos. In his dire situation writing to people in their own mess, he said this: “The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ.” Paul was not writing about a sense of peace that denied the painful realities of life but instead a peace that existed in the midst of them. It was a sense of peace that was not based on logic, but rather on relationship. Not based on the environment around you, but rather in the God that dwells within and alongside: a peace “that passes understanding” – In a God that was born to us in the midst of chaos.

The principles of our Christian Faith do have the potential, if heard and embraced, to change the world. There is no doubt about that, since those principles replace hatred with grace and violence with “This is my commandment, that you love one another. But until the world begins to hear and embrace this truth - however people come to know it - we have at least one other peace available to us – one that passes understanding.

I remember in one of the Pastoral Care books I read on Sabbatical - about a man who was in a Cardiac ICU bed in hospital. He had just undergone radical and experimental surgery designed to save his life. As he lay in ICU, he was in crisis. There were serious post-surgical complications. Later he wrote about the night when he lay awake, fearing that his life was about to end, and reflecting on what it had and had not been, he reflected on all the things he had gotten any way he could and all the things he had lost, all the pain he had suffered and all the pain he had unfairly inflicted upon others. He said he lay there asking himself, amid all his accomplishments and possession, what had been the one thing in his life he had always sought but could never find. “The answer,” he said, “was easy. The one thing he had never been able to locate was Peace.”

The next morning a chaplain visited his room, making rounds from patient to patient. He only stayed a few moments, chatting casually. Prior to leaving he said, “Let me read a brief passage from the Bible to you, and then we will say a prayer.” The chaplain proceeded to open his Bible and almost randomly read the words of the risen Jesus: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. Not as the world give, do I give it to you.” The man said “The words struck me like a spiritual hammer. That chaplain did not know me. He did not know my story. He did not know what I had wrestled with all night long. Without even knowing that he did so, he showed me how to find what I had needed and could not locate all my life. Suddenly I got it – if I could lean into the life and teachings of Jesus, I would find peace.

There are those who say that this is just too easy, too personal, that it doesn't address the chaos that is the daily fare of our world. But then, as Christians, maybe the path to public peace begins with individual peace – begins with you and I leaning into the life and teachings of Jesus who takes our hearts and our hands one at a time and guides us toward our neighbors. Maybe if we lean into the life and teachings of Jesus in the midst of our own chaos, we will be able to share with another who will share with another and so on. Until things begin to change.

Maybe it makes sense that Christmas gets all caught up with Remembrance Day. Because at Christmas we celebrate and welcome once again the one who is born in Bethlehem chaos and who brings and helps us find “a peace that passes understanding” and calls us to pass that peace along. Little by Little, person by person, until at last this weary world may become new. And there will be peace – peace for all. Amen

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.