



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## PEACE

### Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014, 9 pm service

Readings: Isaiah 9a:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Sermon text: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among people of good will!”

Christmas Eve, All is calm, all is bright. Echoing the glad delight of angels, we sing glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth. We sing Silent Night by candlelight and finish with a rousing Joy to the World. Peace and joy, that about sums up the message of Christmas, doesn't it. As this beautiful Christmas card reads on the cover, “peace & joy,” and on the the inside “Remembering with you that silent night so long ago and the Savior's gift of peace, hope and love that fills our heart today.” Thank you BettyRae & Stan.

On a not-so silent night one hundred years ago, mud and the blood covered the snow on the bloody fields of Flanders. Five months into the so-called Great War, the armies of the English and French faced off across terrible no-man's lands to those of the German nations. It was a stupid war, fought over nothing but national pride and a terrible fear of appearing weak. The result: the flower of a whole generation would fall—and Europe gained nothing but future animosity that led to World War II, where indeed appeasement did not stop Hitler from his mad quest. War. Good God. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing.

And yet on this night one hundred ago today the German men in their trenches started singing Stille Nacht. And it did indeed become a holy night as the English sang back Silent Night and the next day the two armies climbed out onto the

bloody field to collect their dead and wounded and exchange small token gifts of food, tobacco and drink. The famous Christmas peace. One hundred years ago tonight on the fields of Flanders.

But although it made for a nice Christmas sermon illustration, that exchange of peace among brothers was not enough to stop the war which went on for another three plus bloody years.

Tradition and sentiment alone are not enough to build peace. One song, no matter how great, won't do it. For those who prefer to check the "none of the above" box on surveys of religious preferences—the so-called "nones," a growing group—the song might be John Lennon's "Imagine." Imagine a world of peace—it's easy if you try—and join with others to make it happen. I'm down with that but I don't think dropping God and religion will do the trick. We get cynical when the peace train doesn't come on time, or the passengers start arguing over who is first on board, and who gets to drive. "Visualize whirled peas" reads the cynical bumper stick. And I'm reminded of another emerging tradition, Festivus ("the festival for the rest of us") which comes out of the Seinfeld episode "The Strike." In this episode, George Costanza is forced to re-live his father's perverse "Festivus" celebration. The night begins with "the airing of complaints" and ends with "feats of strength."

Most of us postpone the airing of complaints and feats of strength until after the opening of presents and the preparation of too much food. But this is hardly what we mean by the Christmas spirit. This is not the peace the angels sing of.

But how can we get to peace? Enduring, sustainable peace?

It will take, faith wisdom, perseverance and tremendous courage. it will take all people of good will.

One of my heroes is a young woman, Malala Yousefzai. She comes from a people often regarded as the enemy of America—the Pashtuns of Pakistan. She is a Muslim—although there is an embattled Christian minority in that province, and the former bishop of Peshawar is a friend who speaks eloquently of their struggle, especially in the wake of a terrible church bombing last year. But this is a place where the terrible logic of extremist religion is used to justify terror. This is the place where the Taliban just murdered hundreds of schoolchildren. This is one of the most violent, war-torn places on earth.

But even at 9 years old Malala was brave enough to blog, secretly, about life under the Taliban. A documentary was made about her and she became well known. Threats were made. She continued anyway. Archbishop Tutu nominated her for an

international children's peace prize. Then, on 9 October 2012, a Taliban gunman shot Malala as she rode home on a bus after taking an exam in Pakistan's Swat Valley. The masked gunman shouted "Which one of you is Malala? Speak up, otherwise I will shoot you all"! She admitted her identity and was shot. The bullet went through her head, neck, and ended in her shoulder. She survived, though in critical condition and needed surgery to remove part of her skull to ease the swelling in her brain where the bullet had passed. But eventually and miraculously she recovered, and she has fearlessly continued her speaking and writing. Malala was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in May of this year, and has donated her prize money to establish schools for children, especially girls, in her native land and elsewhere in the world. Her speech accepting the Nobel Prize, given a couple of weeks ago, is well worth reading. In it, she admits that peace is not always easy:

"I am proud, well in fact, I am very proud to be the first Pashtun, the first Pakistani, and the youngest person to receive this award. Along with that, along with that, I am pretty certain that I am also the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize who still fights with her younger brothers. I want there to be peace everywhere, but my brothers and I are still working on that."

Toward the end she asks some very pointed questions:

"Dear sisters and brothers, the so-called world of adults may understand it, but we children don't. Why is it that countries which we call "strong" are so powerful in creating wars but are so weak in bringing peace? Why is it that giving guns is so easy but giving books is so hard? Why is it, why is it that making tanks is so easy, but building schools is so hard? We are living in the modern age and we believe that nothing is impossible. We have reached the moon 45 years ago and maybe will soon land on Mars. Then, in this 21st century, we must be able to give every child quality education."

As people of faith, we share with Malala belief in an all-merciful and beneficent God. We believe that with God nothing is impossible, as the angel Gabriel told the young woman Mary—someone about Malala's age. "Let it be with me according to your word," she answered the angel. And so began her difficult journey that ended this night in a miraculous birth.

That night, over two thousand years ago, a child was born, a savior given for all people. He was born in a time when an empire built on war ruled most of the known world. We have lived through the rise and falls of many empires since. Peace always comes at a price. But faith is trust in God that we will find a way. Indeed we have been shown the way by the very person born this day in the stable in Bethlehem.

That night the angels sang to the frightened shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people of

good will.” Humanity, blessed by God with great gifts of reason and creativity and freedom, in a world God delights in, has fallen and been broken by sin and death and violence. But God’s will for peace is clear. The angels announced it. Jesus Christ embodied it. Our hearts long for it. So let us be about it—all year long. Let go of the airing of complaints and open the door to forgiveness. Have fun with feats of strength but do not let violent men impose injustice and oppression, especially of women and children—and do not let them invoke the name of God without rebuke from good people of all faiths and none.

Let us resolve to struggle for peace this year, together with Malala and all people of good will and with our Lord and Savior, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Merry Christmas.

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