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Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7; John 14:27

Series: *Behold: A Savior is Born*

Title: *Prophetic Peace*

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This week I came across a Christmas shopping testimony from Victor Penz, long-time pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Pastor Penz shares:

"In December about a year and a half ago, I bought myself a new navy blazer at Nordstrom. It was one of those cases you may have gone through where you buy an item of clothing and the more you wear it, the more you realize you don't like it. My blazer wasn't the right color, and to make matters worse, it attracted lint like it was going out of style. After wearing it pretty regularly for six months or so, I stuck it in my closet and didn't wear it for a long time. Tucked away in the back of my mind all the while was that famous Nordstrom unconditional-return policy. I thought, 'I've had this thing for a year and a half. I've worn it lots of times, and there's just no way they're going to take it back.'

About two weeks ago I decided I had nothing to lose. I pulled the blazer out, threw a lot of lint on it to make it look bad, and took it down to Nordstrom's men's department. I walked in, and immediately I felt nervous. I felt like I was about to pull a scam of some sort, but I played it straight. I walked right up to the first salesman I saw and gave this little prepared speech. I said, 'I am about to put your famous unconditional-return policy to its ultimate test. I have here a blazer. I've worn it lots. I bought it the Christmas before last, so I've had it for a year and a half. I don't like it. It's the wrong color, and it attracts lint like it's going out of style. I want to return this blazer for another blazer that I like.'

Then I stood there. I couldn't believe it. This guy with a big handlebar mustache just looked at me and shook his head. He said, 'For heaven's sake, what took you so long? Let's go find you a blazer.' Ten minutes later I walked out with another blazer that was marked seventy-five dollars more than I paid for the one that I brought in. It was perfect for me. Didn't cost me a penny."

Penz continues: *"God is like Nordstrom. God makes all sorts of outlandish promises that we cannot bring ourselves to believe. Can we? When we get up enough courage or we're desperate enough, we finally take Him at His Word. He looks at us and He shakes his head. 'For heaven's sake,' He says, 'what took you so long?'"*

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Penz's point. I'm convicted because don't always claim God's promises as soon as I should. I forget His "guarantee" to keep every one of them. And I think at times we are all like that. Instead of relying on God for His promised help---we try and make it through life on our own.

That brings me to this morning's message because one promise we really should take God up on is His promise to give us PEACE.

As you know, with Kevin's excellent leadership, we've been going through an advent series in which we have looked at the implications of Jesus' birth. I say "we" because Sue and I have listened to every sermon! We always do. I mean, we see you when you're sleeping. We know when you're awake. We know if you've been bad or good---so be good for goodness' sake. Sorry---I couldn't resist that.

You can see the title of this advent series everywhere you go on campus. What is it? RIGHT! *"Behold a Savior is Born."* As I inferred, my assignment in this series is to remind us all of God's promise to give us this peace we all long for.

Take your Bibles and find two passages of Scripture. The first is Isaiah 9:6-7. It's a popular *"Christmas passage"* where God makes this "peace promise." The second is John 14:27 where Jesus tells us that He is the fulfillment of that promise. As I read, I ask that, if able, you stand in respect for God's Word.

Isaiah 9:6-7

6 - For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, PRINCE OF PEACE.

7 - Of the greatness of His government AND PEACE there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom---establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

John 14:27

"PEACE I leave with you; My PEACE I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Now before we go any further, let's agree on a definition. What exactly is this promised PEACE? The dictionary definition begins with this phrase: *"the absence of war or hostility."*

And that's a good start. Like all Miss America contestants we all want world peace. But Webster goes on to describe peace on a more "local"---personal level. It says it is: *"freedom from quarrels and disagreements; harmonious relations."* And that's good too. We are all happier when we are at peace with our neighbors, friends and family. The Greek word for peace in John 14 is, *"eirene,"* and it was often used in a political sense to describe a town or village that was well run—where things operated efficiently---where people got along with each other, where prosperity and opportunity prevailed.

Interestingly, the leader or official of such a town was often known as the *"Peace-Keeper."* He or she was the kind of leader who subdued enemies, helped the needy, brought abundance to the land---basically, kept everything for everyone hunky dory.

Deborah, the fourth judge of Israel, is a good example. She not only led the Hebrews to victory over their enemies---and the kind of peace that comes from that. She also brought order and prosperity to the Hebrew people. Judges 14:31 tells us that under her leadership, ***"the land had peace 40 years."***

We like leaders like Deborah in our day and age. I mean, when we vote on presidential candidates, we're looking for a Peace-Keeper—someone who can not only resolve our international conflicts---but who can bring order to Washington, stability to Wall Street, and prosperity to Main Street---all of which makes our individual lives more peaceful. And certainly, peace is also what we want in a church family—not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of harmony, order, and vitality---that communal oneness we all need.

But this promised peace is founded on more than harmonious relations between nations and people. It goes deeper than that. The peace we read about in our text is an INNER peace and we only experience it when we are at peace:

(1) ...with GOD.

Paul talks about this---in Romans 5 where he says, ***"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have PEACE WITH GOD---through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."***

Understand---BEFORE we put our faith in Jesus we are NOT at peace with God. Colossians 1:21 says, we are ***"alienated from God and were enemies because of our evil behavior."*** But when we confess our sin---asking for Jesus' forgiveness, we are forgiven, cleansed, and pure. Through our faith in our Lord Who was born that night in Bethlehem, we become, ***"holy in God's sight, without blemish and free from accusation."*** (Colossians 1) Ephesians 2:14 says, ***"For He Himself---Jesus---is our peace, Who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility---for through HIM we have access to the Father."***

Because of our faith in Jesus, we are no longer at enmity with God---no longer on the "other side." Thanks to His sacrificial, atoning death on the cross, we can be at peace with our Maker.

Think of it this way: Jesus became our peace OFFERING. And---quoting Webster again, a peace offering defined as: *“a gift or service for the purpose of procuring peace or reconciliation.”*

In our Chronological Bible reading we just finished the book of Hebrews. In that book, the writer talks about the people of the Old Testament recognizing this enmity between themselves and God by bringing peace offerings---sacrifices to God in His temple. But Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus came to fulfill all that symbolism. He came to be the once and for all peace offering to God for all mankind. And that is what was prophesied. Through Isaiah God promised that Jesus would be the PRINCE of PEACE. But Isaiah was more specific. He said, **“The punishment that brought us PEACE was ON HIM.”** (Isaiah 53:5) God inspired Isaiah such that he was able to see that it would take the blood of Jesus His only Son, shed on the cross, to make peace possible between Him and sinners like you and me.

Back to my point---to experience PEACE WITH GOD we must personally, individually confess that Jesus is God’s only Son---that He died in our place. We must accept Jesus as our Savior. We must each claim Him as our peace offering. Let me just stop and ask if you’ve done that. If you haven’t---then you need to. You see---to experience God’s promised peace, we must each resolve our own inner-sin problem. Then we can be at peace no matter how UN-peaceful life is. The fact is we can’t have peace without the Prince.

One of my favorite films is *Amistad*, which tells the true story of a ship in 1839 that is full of recently captured Africans bound for the auction block in the West Indies. During the voyage, the Africans are able to take over the ship but without sailing skills they end up in American waters---off the coast of New England. They are imprisoned while the U.S. decides what to do with them. Christians come stand outside the windows to their cells every day and try and share the Gospel but of course the Africans cannot read or speak English. So, a Bible the Christians pass through the bars---is cast aside. No one can understand its words. But one of the Africans picks it up---and over the next few days, by looking at the pictures that are found throughout the Bible, he comes to understand the Gospel. He understands Who Jesus is and why He came---and this imprisoned man puts his faith in our Lord---and in that decision is made FREE indeed.

For the rest of the film---this man stands out among his peers---because in spite of trial after trial---in spite of being kept behind bars for years and threatened with being sold into slavery---this man is at peace. He learned---as billions of others have---that it is this decision that gives us this source of inner calm.

Why?

Because through faith in Jesus we get back what was lost in the Fall---a personal relationship with our Creator. Through our faith that God-shaped hole that is in all people is filled. We are whole. Do you remember Augustine’s words? *“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”* I like how J. C. Ryle puts it:

“Without justification it is impossible to have real peace. Conscience forbids it. Sin is a mountain between a man and God and must be taken away. The sense of guilt lies heavy on the heart and must be removed.

Unpardoned sin will murder peace. The true Christian knows all this well. His peace arises from a consciousness of his sins being forgiven, and his guilt being put away. He has peace with God, because he is justified.”

Thanks to the justification that Jesus alone makes possible we are no longer alone in life. God Himself---IMMANUEL is with us---just as He was with Adam and Eve before the fall. Well, IMMANUEL makes all other peace possible---including peace:

(2) With others.

God talks about this kind of peace repeatedly in His Word.

- Romans 12:18 says, **“As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”**
- Hebrews 12:14, **“Make every effort to live in peace with all men.**

- 1st Peter 3:10-11, ***“Whoever would love life and see good days must seek peace and pursue it.”***

In each of these verses God commands us to be at peace with others. The Greek here literally means to “*persecute*” peace--- it conveys the idea of vigilance---single-minded pursuit to leave no stone unturned in our efforts, to humble ourselves, if need be, in order to achieve the goal of peace with others.

Do you remember the verse from Colossians that is part of our benediction? I’ve loved hearing you say it after each service: ***“Let the peace of Christ RULE in your hearts.”*** As I have said in the past, the Greek word that we translate as “*rule*” literally means “*umpire*.” It’s a word that was used in Jesus’ day in the athletic arena---to describe the official who settled disputes on the field, like our Upward refs who say when someone is travelling---or when a player has stepped out of bounds or when one player fouls another or when Hugh tells a parent that yelling at the ref is a no-no.

Paul is saying the peace of Christ is to be the “ref” or “umpire” in our relationships as Christians. When disputes come in a church family, and they will, the peace of Christ is to rule---because we know that in His Word God says how His children are to interact and behave. We are to love one another and settle disputes in a way that honors our Lord and keeps this church family bound together---at peace. This peace is one way we show the world that Jesus is IN each of us--RULING each of us.

I preached at Viers Mill Baptist a couple weeks back---and like most churches they set aside a part of their service to greet one another. There were only about 40 people in the building that day---a huge sanctuary that would easily seat 500 or more---and these 40 people were scattered all over the room---so---it took a while for everyone to get to everyone else and greet them.

But they took the time---nearly 10 minutes. People left the choir loft and greeted every individual present. Others came to the choir loft to greet someone. Those sitting in the front went to those in the back and vice versa. I mean, literally everyone greeted everyone! At first, I thought, *“This is taking a lot of time!”* But then I heard God tell me, *“It’s worth it Mark. Don’t worry about time. Remember that verse? ‘How wonderful it is when God’s people dwell in unity? Just enjoy the wonder!’”* I did---and it was WONDERFU! They are a church that obviously obeys their referee and because they do, they are at peace with one another. This small congregation reminded me that ALL Churches must manifest the Prince of Peace in their relationships---not just at Christmas---but all year long.

Here’s something else I need to mention. As I inferred earlier, when we experience this promised peace with God we are also enabled to be at peace:

(3) ...with OURSELVES.

Like that African man on the *Amistad*, with Immanuel’s help we can be at peace even in situations that are not at all peaceful. This is important because Christians are not exempt from tough times---things in this world that threaten our peace---scary diagnoses, unexpected bills, family problems, the passing of loved ones, downsizing at work. In John 16:33 Jesus said---promised, ***“I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*** When we encounter these troubles that Jesus said would inevitably come---we can be at peace remembering He is SUPERIOR to them. I mean, they don’t call Him “PRINCE of Peace” for nothing!

Ephesians 1:22 says that ***“God placed ALL THINGS under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church.”*** Jesus exercises power over our fears and troubles---and knowing that---knowing our loving Lord is in charge--- gives us peace. We can ***“cast all our anxiety on Him [Who is over all]---knowing He cares for us!”*** (1 Peter 5:7) --- and is willing and able to help us. Remember what Jesus said? ***“Therefore---SINCE I AM OVER EVERYTHING---I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes***

the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25ff)

Of course, the biggest “trouble” we face in this life is death but with Jesus we don’t need to fear even it because He defeated it. If we want to see an example---a picture of this INNER peace---we need only look at Jesus. During His earthly ministry He showed us what it looks like to have peace with ourselves. For example, the very storm that made His disciples panic, made Him drowsy.

- Remember? They feared that their boat would be their TOMB but to Jesus it was a CRADLE.
- Another time, when Jesus was teaching a crowd of 5,000 men-not counting women and children, the disciples panicked because it was supper time, and they were worried about how they would feed this crowd.

When they informed Jesus, He didn’t stress out. He faced that situation with truly unworldly calm. He relied on God’s power and fed all those people!

- When He began His earthly ministry and told people in the synagogue that He was the Messiah, they tried to throw Him off a cliff, but He calmly walked through their midst.
- The professional mourners at the home of Jairus laughed in His face when He told them the little girl was only asleep. Then He calmly entered her room and raised her from the dead.
- Even the raging demoniac in the graveyard at Gadara did not scare Him.
- When the temple police came to arrest Him, He didn’t panic.

He even took the time to calmly heal a man whose ear had been loped off by Peter. Jesus’ entire trial was a travesty of justice. Yet He calmly moved from judge to judge, ***“as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth.”*** (Isaiah 53:7) Later while the other prisoners cursed their executioners, Jesus prayed for them, ***“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”*** Jesus lived the kind of peace He offers to you and me. With Him in us---with us---empowering us---we can be like Him---at peace no matter how rough life gets.

Before he became a Christian, Lee Strobel was a reporter for *The Chicago Tribune*. And one of the stories he was assigned to cover showed him the peace of Christ. His editor sent him to meet an impoverished, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. A devout atheist at the time, Strobel was mildly surprised by the family's attitude in spite of their circumstances: The Delgados—60-year-old Perfecta and her granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny—had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement---and were now living in a tiny, two-room apartment on the West Side. Strobel says,

“As I walked in, I couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions. In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister---who would wear it the rest of the way. But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.”

Strobel completed his article, then moved on to more high-profile assignments. But when Christmas Eve arrived, he found his thoughts drifting back to the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God's providence. He says, *"I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy---while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment."*

In the middle of a slow news day, Strobel decided to pay another visit to the Delgados. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations. Once inside, Strobel encountered new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents; bags of food---and a large selection of warm winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash. But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel, an atheist in the middle of Christmas generosity. It was the family's response to those gifts. He says,

"As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: 'Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.' That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed me. She said: 'This is wonderful; this is very good,' and gesturing toward the largess she continued. 'We did nothing to deserve this---it's a gift from God. But, it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.' To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything---more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus---because, in a sense, I saw Him in Perfecta and her granddaughters. They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material---and something made me long for what they had. Or, more accurately, for the One they knew."

That leads me to mention another aspect of this promised peace. It is meant to be shared. As the carol puts it we are to *"Go and tell it on the mountains and over the hills and everywhere that Jesus has been born."* In other words, God wants us to share the good news of the Prince of Peace...

(4) ...with EVERYONE.

In his book, *What Good Is God?*, Philip Yancey shares a true story from Afghanistan that took place in the early 1970's---before the Russian occupation or the Taliban regime. He writes:

"At the time, the government allowed a small Christian church to service internationals who worked there, though no Afghans could attend. A friend of mine named Len organized a musical team of young people to tour countries in the Middle East. With some trepidation, he also accepted an invitation to extend the trip to Afghanistan for a concert in downtown Kabul. Len made the teenagers write out exactly what they would say, subject to his approval. 'This is a strict Muslim government,' he warned them. 'If you say the wrong thing, you could end up in prison and at the same time jeopardize every Christian who lives in this country. Memorize these words and don't dare stray from them when you perform.' The teenagers listened wide-eyed as he described the ominous consequence of a slight misstep. The night of the official concert in Kabul, almost a thousand Afghans filled the hall and spilled outside the open doors to listen. All went well until one teenager on the team put down his guitar and started improvising: 'I'd like to tell you about my best Friend, a man named Jesus, and the difference He has made in my life.' From the side of the stage, Len motioned wildly for him to stop, drawing his finger across his neck. Ignoring him, the teenager proceeded to give a detailed account of how God had transformed his life.

Len told me, 'I was practically beside myself. I knew the consequences, and I sat with my head in my hands waiting for the sword to drop. Instead, the most amazing thing happened. The Minister of Cultural Affairs for Afghanistan stood and walked to the stage to respond. He said: 'We have seen many American young people come through this country. Most of them come for drugs, and most look like hippies. We have not seen nor heard from young people like you. God's love is a message my country needs. How thrilled I am to hear you! You are a prototype for the youth of Afghanistan to follow in the future. I would like to invite you to expand your tour so that you visit every college and

faculty and also give this same message on Kabul Radio. I will make it happen.’ Len was dumbfounded. That night he gathered the musical group together. ‘Did you hear what the man said? We’re changing our tickets, of course, to lengthen our visit. And he wants you to give this same message— you’d better not change a word!’ Over the next few days, the musical team held other performances. After each event Afghan young people crowded around with questions. ‘Tell me more about this Jesus—we know of him through the Qur’an. You speak of a personal relationship with God. Can you describe it? How does your faith change you?’ Some asked to pray with the teenagers. Nothing like it had ever happened in Afghanistan.

On the last day, after a triumphant tour, the teenagers met J. Christy Wilson, a revered figure in Afghanistan. Born of missionary parents in Iran, he [had] spent 22 years in Afghanistan, serving as principal of a government high school and teaching English to the Crown Prince and Afghan diplomats. He also led the Community Christian Church and founded the School for the Blind in Kabul. Wilson drove the teenagers to an unusual tourist site, the only cemetery in Afghanistan where ‘infidels’ could be buried. He walked to the first, ancient gravestone, pitted with age and said, ‘This man worked here 30 years and translated the Bible into the Afghan language, Not a single convert. And in this grave next to him lies the man who replaced him, along with his children who died here. He toiled for 25 years and baptized the first Afghan Christian.’ As they strolled among the gravestones, he recounted the stories of early missionaries and their fates. At the end of the row he stopped, turned, and looked the teenagers straight in the eye. ‘For 30 years, one man moved rocks. That’s all he did, move rocks. Then came his replacement, who did nothing but dig furrows. There came another who planted seeds, and another who watered. And now you kids—you kids—are bringing in the harvest.’ Len said, ‘It was one of the great moments of my life, I watched their faces as it suddenly dawned on these exuberant American teenagers----that the amazing spiritual awakening they had witnessed was but the last step in a long line of faithful service stretching back over many decades.’

You and I should each be causing SPIRITUAL AWAKENINGS. Not only at Christmas---but all year round we should be changing the world. I mentioned the meaning of the Greek word for peace. The Hebrew word is “*Shalom*” and it carries this idea of getting everything back the way it was before the fall. We are at peace with God---with each other and within ourselves.

Whichever word you use---the possibility of that caliber of peace is good news---and good news must be shared.

Let’s pray.