

Dec. 31, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts:

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A poem by Maya Angelou entitled '*Amazing Peace*'.

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to
 avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and gray and threatening.

We question ourselves.
What have we done to
 so affront nature?
We interrogate and worry God.
Are you there? Are you there, really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension,
 Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the
 bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from
 rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps
 quietly in the corner.
Floodwaters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they
 walk into their sunsets.
Hope spreads around the earth, brightening
 all things,
Even hate, which crouches breeding in
 dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now.

It is louder.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound.
We are thrilled by
its presence.
It is what we have hungered for.
Not just the absence of war. But true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of
Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while
with us.
We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and
Muslim, say come.
Peace.
Come and fill us and our world with your
majesty.
We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and
the Confucian,
Implore you to stay a while with us
So we may learn by your shimmering light
How to look beyond complexion and see
community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

On this platform of peace, we can create a
language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to
each other.

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of
Jesus Christ
Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues the coming
of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and
Non-Believers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at our world and speak the
word aloud.
Peace. We look at each other, then into
ourselves
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:

Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul.

Maya Angelou

For all of those who call themselves or others desolate, decimated, about to be destroyed in this new year, your true name is '*my delight, my cherished ones, my beloveds*', for whom there is no other identity. You belong—and together we shall create peace.

The promise to Jerusalem, *shalom*, is also the promise to Islam, *as-salamu alaykum*. The true practitioners of that faith only want peace—like us.

We attempted 10 days after the explosion of Gaza to come together to pray for peace. Rabbi Dan, and the Islamic Center, and myself met, because this is not a religious war— it is not! It is power, greed, insatiable greed, and violence worshipping itself.

And they asked that Peace would host this gathering of prayers for peace among us.—Of course, I said yes. But then the security people in the Bay Area, including the FBI, asked that we not hold prayers for peace—because that would be too dangerous...too much at risk, too many people hating, threatening. Yeah.

This beautiful story for today, Simeon is in the Temple, the child is brought in for the blessings. He [Simeon] had been promised, '*Before [you] die, you shall see the one who makes for peace.*' And he's holding this child. '*Now I can go in peace.*' It's all good.

And then he says (oops that's too high. I'm hearing reverb. Are you okay? Just bring it down a little bit) Then he says, '*This child will be called a Sign of Contradiction.*' And this is really, really important—because this little one who comes to be peace, and breathe peace, and teach peace, and live peace, and love peace, is not wanted.

This is the message friends. We don't really want peace—we want things to be quiet. We want problems to go away—but we don't want to do the things that make for peace. And that's what the whole Jesus story is about. Why does he stir so much conflict? '*Turn the other cheek. Bless those who curse you. Open the heart. Forgive 70 times seven.*' We don't want it. That's why there's a crucifixion. And not only that, Simeon says to Mary and Joseph, '*This child of yours will put a sword through your own hearts.*' It will cost you. This is what they lived with—his parents—for a lifetime.

'*Would that you knew the things that make for peace,*' Jesus says just before he enters Jerusalem at the end of his life. Do we really want to know?

The reason our peace efforts go nowhere, is because war is total commitment. You've got to give warmongers credit for that—Total Commitment. Whereas people of peace are saying, '*I hope it comes. I wish it would change. I don't know how much time I can really invest in this. And why is the world such a mess?*'

'*Would that you knew the things that make for peace.*'

We say every Sunday, *'There is no way to peace'* because it is not a strategic plan. The work of peace begins within us—it must become soul deep. It is not possible and superficial just political realms to accomplish. Peace. It's a transformation of our hearts to live inside of that love, which makes no sense to our world.

Anna was not in that Temple all those decades so she could become more holy. She wasn't there to improve her spiritual measurements. She was there fasting and praying for peace, in her life and those around her.

And these are the three things we need as we begin this new year, presented rather frequently as potentially a Year of Terror. We need wisdom. We desperately need wisdom. Knowledge is about data. It can make people cold and clever. There are amazing, amazing things that AI can do. It's a great research tool. It's also amazing all the deceit it can foist on our society—false impressions and lies. We need wisdom, which is understanding. It goes much deeper than mere information.

I love the ancient Taoist comment, which said, *'When wise people hear Wisdom they go, 'Oh, that's for me!'* When average people hear Wisdom, they go, *'Huh, I don't know—maybe.'* And when fools hear Wisdom they go, *'[laughter] You're kidding me!'* They laugh out loud. But if fools didn't laugh, it wouldn't be Wisdom. Yeah, no need to waste any more time on foolishness, is there? Wisdom to ground our hearts as Simeon and Anna.

We need imagination to stir the possibilities from our hearts, to create what we believe in and what we long for. Realists always put down imagination, right? It's *'Come on. Get real.'* No. No, it's from the heart to the heart. That's what we need. That's how we will create the peace we long for—not by waiting for politicians to solve it! It's what we enact. And that imagination stirring our hearts stories and truths is essential in order for there to be connection and relationship.

Because power and insatiable greed have no need of relationship. It's just trampling who's ever in front of it. It doesn't care. It's not trying to create a society which says 'This is how we can take care of one another—how we can provide healthcare for absolutely everybody.' *'We can't do that—it's not affordable! If you look at the economics, I mean, have you been to Wall Street?'*

Balderdash!!

We need wisdom. We need you. We need hearts alive. We need the imagination of God within us—to restore relationships with the earth, with each other, with hope, with our children, with lives that matter. So that we, by God's grace and mercy, through a crucified, contradictory love, can live into that peace which the world cannot give—translating our lives, so that our own lives make sense to us and each other—building a peace, not just for Christmas.
Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

