

# “The Way of Peace”

Luke 1:68-79, Micah 5:5a

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A dark, clear, moonless night can be frightening, dangerous and disorienting or if you look up at the stars it can be inspiring, spectacular and peaceful. It is a matter of perspective. The distance between us and each star is tremendous, a thick place, so thick that all we see is a spec of light, a twinkle, yet if we could travel closer to a thin place the light would be intense. Many stars are bigger than our sun. On earth the distance to the sun is around 93 million miles still a very thick place yet the sun completely illumines our days.

Scripture declares Luke 1:78-79 “Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God’s Sunrise will break in upon us, shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.”

God is infinite grandeur than our grandest imagination so God uses a variety of metaphors which at their best with our most abundant imagination still just give us a mere snippet of the glory of God. God is like a brilliant sun however our perception is so feeble we perceive just the faintest, fuzzy, fragment of light.

Scripture often talks about “thin places” were people perceive God. In the Old Testament thin places usually came through the temple and angels. The temple was considered the earth’s belly button. God’s love, grace, joy, hope, peace and glory flowed into the temple, into the holy of holies and then rippled out through people. Occasionally God sent angels to reveal God self.

Christmas is the thinnest place. In Jesus both heaven and earth fully dwell. Jesus connects us with God. In Jesus, God broke through every barrier between God and us by becoming one of us. Jesus enables us to begin to perceive God for God now has a human face, God now walks among us in a body like ours, God knows exactly what it feels like to live in our restrictive, finite shell we call our physical body. Jesus’ life, love, compassion, joy, hope, peace and resurrection give us a glimpse of God’s majesty. Jesus gives us a glimpse of how God is redeeming and molding us into a perfect, glorious person with abundant eternal life. Jesus brought to earth a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit brings snippets of the Kingdom of God into us.

Christmas is people lost, afraid, hopeless, confused in deep darkness, in the shadow of death, perceiving the brilliant light of God, receiving God’s light and shining. Christmas is liberation from darkness into the light of God’s peace.

We often pray for “God’s kingdom to come” yet fail to perceive God’s kingdom. Thomas Merton believed that God’s kingdom, thin places, are all around us and in us. Thomas wrote, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time...if we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves we see it sometimes... the only thing is that we don’t let ourselves see it.” We are constantly missing the Kingdom of God breaking into our lives by looking down, stumbling in the dark instead of looking up and being guided by the light.

The prophet Micah foretold Micah 5:5a “[Jesus] will be the source of peace.” The priest Zechariah sang. Luke 1:79 “[Jesus will] show us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.”

Our English word “peace” is faint compared to its Old Testament root “shalom” which both Micah and Zechariah spoke. Shalom peace is completeness, soundness and well being of the total person, physical, emotional and spiritual. Shalom, peace is completeness and harmony between people and with all of creation. This peace is God given. Shalom peace is contentment. Shalom was used as a greeting, like when we pass the peace of Christ. In this cause you are praying for all the blessings of God to complete them.

Today we are celebrating the peace that God gives us. We come together to share our perception of peace and to be filled with God’s peace. One step on the path of peace is to savor and share the thin places where we perceive God. There are thin places that all of us can perceive and also thin places that God makes just for each of us. Sadly sometimes our perception is so twisted we miss God, other times we worship the thin place instead of God.

A Christmas tree can be perceived as an evergreen tree symbolizing eternal life, shining with light, adorned with ornaments symbolizing God’s blessings in our life, times of loved shared, special moments of joy. Or a Christmas tree can be perceived as a dead tree that soon will be thrown out, a costly burden to buy and decorate. Sometimes we worship the Christmas tree hoping that once decorated the Christmas tree will bring us joy and peace. God is the source of all blessings. God often makes Christmas festive through a Christmas tree however the tree cannot do anything without God.

A Christmas cookie can be perceived as a symbol of God’s creativity who gives us an abundance and variety of food, the ability to taste and delight in savoring the cookie. Or a Christmas cookie can be seen as another chore to complete, a food that will make you fat, unhealthy and in need of a gym membership. A Christmas cookie can be perceived as a symbol of God’s love if made and given with love however cookies made under pressure when exhausted and careless given in haste will likely dampen love.

A bell choir anthem can be perceived as a symbol of God’s joyful harmony, the fruition of every member uniting over time by their rehearsals, shared laughter, care for, support and encouragement of one another like the Northern Bells. Or a bell choir anthem

can be a chore, the rehearsals a burden, a competition, times of criticism and cutting one another down. A bell choir anthem can be a gift shared to inspire us to worship God and sense God's delight in us or a performance to be judged.

A Christmas gift can be perceived as a symbol of being known and loved like God knows and love us. In this instance the gift is thoughtful matched to the likes of the receiver and given in love. The gift will be a thin place filling the giver and receiver with joy. Or a Christmas gift can be another burden for the giver to give. If carelessly grabbed from the bargain bin with little thought of the recipient then it will likely bring little joy.

A Christmas party can be a symbol of belonging like we belong to God, a time of grace like God is gracious to us. A Christmas party can be a time when people share memories of good times, forgive each other, forget mistakes, let go of hurts, everyone builds each other up and celebrates the beauty in each person. Or a Christmas party can be a place where people cut each other down, complain, judge, shame, exclude, share bad news and compete with each other.

One step on the path of peace is to perceive God. In each of the examples if you perceive God then you are likely at peace. If you are unaware of God then you are likely chaotic, fearful, anxious, frustrated, confused and discontent. Discover, enjoy and share your thin places, those moments where you perceive God. Perhaps playing outdoors, hugging someone, sipping a hot beverage, savoring a sunset, enjoying decorations, delighting in a pageant, serving another, laughing with friends, watching a parade, cherishing candle light, amusing in a show, appreciating others, working, singing, walking, resting, sharing, thinking, feeling.

Peace often alludes us, sometimes because of our perception, we are looking down into the dark instead of up at the stars, or we are focused on our limitations instead of God's promises or we are discontent over what we do not have instead of content with what we do have, or we see faith as something we have to earn rather than a gift we receive or we judge instead of being gracious.

A step on the path of peace is trusting the promises of God in spite of our limitations. The priest Zechariah was in at that time the thinnest place on earth. Zechariah dedicated his life to learning, meditating, living and teaching God's word. Zechariah entered the Holy of Holies in the temple after performing the purification ritual and praying. The other priests and many people were praying for Zechariah as he worshiped God in the Holy of Holies. God spoke to Zechariah telling him how God was about to fulfill God's promises through Jesus. Even in that thin place Zechariah could not perceive the coming of God's promises instead he responded with questions and concerns. He let human limitations obscure the coming glory of Jesus, the fulfillment of God's promises. Zechariah became mute giving him plenty of time to adjust his perception, to ponder the promises of God, to remember God's movement in history and in his life, to imagine God's promises fulfilled, to receive God's blessings. God is always shining. God is

always offering blessings. God is always giving us peace. However God honors our free will. We need to perceive, accept and receive what God is offering us.

It took Zechariah nine months to perceive God, to accept and receive God's blessings. Then Zechariah found his voice and his first words were: Luke 1:68-79 MSG "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; God came and set God's people free. God set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David God's servant, Just as God promised long ago through the preaching of God's holy prophets: Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand; Mercy to our parents, as God remembers to do what God said God would do, What God swore to our father Abraham—a clean rescue from the enemy camp, So we can worship God without a care in the world, made holy before God as long as we live. And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest," will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways, Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins. Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace."

God is permeating you life and the entire world with light. Observe, discover and savor God's light. Share how you are perceiving God. Imagine the fulfillment of all God's promises. Imagine the brilliance of the Kingdom of God. Share your grandest dreams. Each of us is able to perceive and imagine a mere facet of God's brilliance. Together our perception of God grows, the next step on the path of peace is revealed enabling us to accept more and more of the blessings of God, making each of us more like Jesus, making earth more like heaven. Amen