

Sunday 13 December 2015

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Advent: Peace

Jesus is our Peace in a world of unease

(BLACK/SLIDE 1).

As I was thinking about this message, I've got the impression that some of us – myself included – are feeling very busy, very rushed, and a little bit uneasy during this Christmas season.

In a time when we are meant to pause and consider what Christmas is truly about, it seems like instead we panic and succumb to how the world tells us to behave during this time and what the world says is important.

In a world of unease, it seems like the one thing we really need is increasingly hard to grasp ... and that is, peace.

(SLIDE 2)

Those of us who are parents will know something called 'The witching hour'. Often without fail, this happens somewhere between 5 and 7 o'clock at night where there is a mad rush to get kids fed, bathed, clothed, and into bed. It's crazy right, anyone else agree with me here?

Well once that witching hour is over, then comes one of the

favourite parts of my day.

The boys are in bed! Now don't get me wrong, I love my kids and can't imagine what life would be like without them. However, there is something about that time when they are safely tucked away in their beds, the house is actually quiet, and my wife and I can now sit on the couch, stretch our legs out, and enjoy the peace.

(SLIDE 3)

Well, as any parent can tell you, that peace can sometimes be short lived. Or the night seems to go way too quickly and the morning rush begins way too soon.

Peace is often something that is hard to come by and hard to sustain in our lives. We might possess it for a while, and then life happens, and our peace is disrupted. We get the result we don't want to hear. We hear about a trial our friend or family member is going through. We lose our job and source of income.

We all live in the real world where the currency of the day is often busyness or stress. We have deadlines that loom over us. Products that yell at us to buy them. Anxiety haunts our minds and tells us we need to be better or do better. And rather than peacefulness, we often find ourselves in times of restlessness.

And this is not just in our personal lives, but also in the world around us. You only have to turn the news on, or flick through the news on the internet, to see the restlessness in nations, cultures, groups and individuals. People are killing each other and destroying homes and communities on a daily basis. As many people say, there seems to be only bad news.

(SLIDE 4)

So what is the good news for us? What positives can we choose to focus on in this day and age? What does the Bible say to us about peace in unease?

Well, it's interesting to look at the prophets in the Old Testament. Most of them were living in circumstances where nations were doing their own thing, not giving a care to God's Word or commands. As we've seen in our series on Judges, they were doing what was right in their own eyes.

This is very similar to what is happening today.

(SLIDE 5)

One such prophet in the Old Testament was a guy named Micah. Micah was called from a rustic home to be a prophet. He left his familiar surroundings to deliver a stern message of judgment to the princes and people of Jerusalem. Angered by the abusive treatment of the poor by the rich and influential, Micah turned his verbal rebukes on any who would use their social or political

power for personal gain.

Micah would have a field day with the likes of Donald Trump!

Anyway, Micah wrote some words that have been etched into the Christianity Hall of Fame, words that have encouraged and inspired millions of people. They are also a summary of much of what the prophets of Israel had to say.

(SLIDE 6)

These words are found in his book, in chapter 6 verse 8:

The Lord has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

This might be the catch phrase of Micah's words, but he not only rebuked his people, he also issued several prophecies of the coming Messiah, such as Micah 5:2 which says, *"But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel."*

Micah also talked about peace and described a future time of peace and prosperity when Israel would once more serve the Lord faithfully and completely.

(SLIDE 7)

Let's have a look at that in chapter 4 verse 1 – 7:

In days to come the mountain where the Temple stands will be the highest one of all, towering above all the hills.

Many nations will come streaming to it, and their people will say,

“Let us go up the hill of the Lord, to the Temple of Israel's God.

He will teach us what he wants us to do; we will walk in the paths he has chosen. For the Lord's teaching comes from Jerusalem; from Zion he speaks to his people.”

(SLIDE 8)

³ He will settle disputes among the nations, among the great powers near and far. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning knives.

Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again.

Everyone will live in peace among their own vineyards and fig trees, and no one will make them afraid.

The Lord Almighty has promised this.

(SLIDE 9)

Each nation worships and obeys its own god, but we will worship and obey the Lord our God forever and ever.

“The time is coming,” says the Lord, “when I will gather together the people I punished, those who have suffered in exile.

They are crippled and far from home, but I will make a new beginning with those who are left, and they will become a great nation. I will rule over them on Mount Zion from that time on and forever.”

When we hear these words from Micah about a time where there is universal peace, it is only natural for us to ask questions about this time and to reflect on the place of peace in our own lives, our communities, our nation, and the rest of the world.

World Peace. Beauty queens say it's their greatest desire.

Activists across the world are working towards it. Governments are supposedly trying to secure it. But is it really possible? This peace in a world of unease?

I came across a study done in 2012 by the Consumer Electronics Association, which asked people to rank in order what their greatest desires were for Christmas gifts.

Guess what came in first then? It was electronic tablets. In second place was cash. And coming in third place, playing second fiddle to tablets and cash, world peace and happiness.

(SLIDE 10)

People surveyed would be happy enough swapping a phone or laptop for peace and happiness, but asking them to part with their precious tablet or cash, now you're asking something!

It's a bit of a joke I know, but maybe there is something to this...

Micah tells us of a time when everyone will live in peace – swords will be replaced for ploughs, spears for pruning knives, nations will never go to war with each other again, people will not live in fear anymore.

Sounds fantastic! Today, however, is sadly not that time...
(SLIDE 11)

People live in fear – from terrorism and war. Nations are constantly fighting each other. Spears are replaced with bombs. And swords are replaced with guns, lots of them. It's a scary world, where it seems that chaos and confusion reign, not peace and prosperity.

So what and when is Micah referring to when he writes of this universal peace? What was going on around him?

Micah lived between 750 and 686 BC and when he wrote this, a man named Hezekiah was the king of Jerusalem. Hezekiah and his men were in desperate need of hope and peace, because outside the walls of Jerusalem there were legions of Assyrian enemy troops gathering and threatening to invade.

Questions would have been flying through their minds
What would become of their beloved Jerusalem?
How could this small nation of Judah ever bring peace and prosperity to earth and end the military terrorization of the big nations around them?

How could the nations be brought to the place where they would accept Judah's God and serve Him?
And how could the troubling circumstances around them be overcome with the peace that God brings?

Translation: How could God be their peace in such a time of unease?

Micah's words serve as a secure foundation for hope in this dark day. King Hezekiah and his faithful followers can put their trust in God and hope for the future, because none of their enemies can prevent God's ultimate plan for the world.

This hope and peace is not the promise of a quick and painless deliverance, not like whipping of a band aid short and sweet; first it calls the listener to trust in God's transforming power to bring peace into the situation.

Micah – and his hearers – know that everyone can rest secure, for eventually and ultimately God will transform this world and set up His Kingdom on earth. A Kingdom of peace.
(SLIDE 12)

Let's delve closer into Micah's words now, starting with chapter 4 verses one and two:

In days to come the mountain where the Temple stands will be the highest one of all, towering above all the hills.

Many nations will come streaming to it, and their people will say, "Let us go up the hill of the Lord, to the Temple of Israel's God. For He will teach us what He wants us to do; we will walk in the paths he has chosen. For the Lord's teaching comes from Jerusalem; from Zion He speaks to His people.

The start of Micah's prophecy tells of a future time when the world will experience God's presence in a completely new way. There will be a new relationship between God and humankind, between Israel and the nations.

(SLIDE 13)

Micah speaks of a mountain, which will be the highest of all, towering above all the hills, a temple will stand on this mountain and nations will come streaming to it.

It's as though God's heavenly dwelling place and His earthly temple are joined as one; and this represents to the nations the greatness and importance of the Lord God.

They will come streaming to the hill of the Lord, but not just to see and behold the Lord's holy mountain and temple, but actually to hear the words of God and be taught His ways from God himself.

This will be the source of their hope and strength. God's ways

describe how He acts and who He is. The goal of his teaching is the practical direction of people's lives, so that they will end up walking in ways consistent with God's ways.

So why is this important? Because it shows us that people's source of hope and strength is not in themselves, but rather in the Lord and in His Word. Left to our own devices, we worry about the future and live in unease, whereas with God, He is our peace in unease. His powerful presence and persuasive message will transform the thinking and behaviour of millions of people in the last days.

(SLIDE 14)

Let's keep reading Micah's words, verses three and four:
He will settle disputes among the nations, among the great powers near and far. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. Everyone will live in peace amount their own vineyards and fig trees; and no-one will make them afraid. The Lord Almighty has promised this.

As well as changing the lives of individuals and communities, Micah's words speak into the eternal destinies of the nations. God will remove the reasons for international conflict so that people will not need to go to war with each other again.

Weapons of war and death will be destroyed and turned into instruments of agriculture, which will preserve rather than destroy life. Every person will have plenty to eat, be free of anxiety, and live in peace.

This is a promise.

Can you imagine it? How good would it be?

(SLIDE 15)

It reminds me of something that happened during the First World War. It was Christmas day, 1914, in the first year of the war, where German, British and French soldiers disobeyed their superiors and fraternized with the 'enemy' along two-thirds of the Western front.

German troops held Christmas trees up out of the trenches with signs saying "Merry Christmas", "You no shoot, we no shoot."

Thousands of troops streamed across a no-man's land scattered with dead bodies. They sang Christmas carols, exchanged photographs of loved ones back home, played football with each other, and even roasted some pigs together!

(SLIDE 16)

Soldiers embraced men they had been trying to kill just a few short hours before. They agreed to warn each other that if their

superiors forced them to fire their weapons, they would aim high.

A shudder ran through the high command on each side. Here was disaster in the making: Soldiers declaring their brotherhood with each other and refusing to fight.

Generals on both sides declared this spontaneous peace-making to be treason and subject to court martial. And by March 1915, the fraternization movement had been eradicated and the killing machine put back into full operation.

By the time of the final peace agreement in 1918, fifteen million men would be slaughtered.

A time of peace was possible, even if it was only for a short time. The Christmas Truce, as it is known, goes against most of what we have been taught about people.

It gives us a glimpse of the world as we wish it could be and is says, "This really happened once. Can it happen again?" It reminds us of those thoughts we keep hidden away, vastly different to the bad news that consistently tells us how trivial and mean human life is.

It's like hearing that our deepest wishes really are true: the world really could be different. Could we really all live at peace?

Micah tells us not only that we can, but that one day we all **will** live in peace.

(SLIDE 17)

Let's read the final verses again now, five to seven:

Each nation worships and obeys its own god, but we will worship and obey the Lord our God forever and ever.

"The time is coming", says the Lord, "when I will gather together the people I have punished, those who have suffered in exile.

They are crippled and far from home, but I will make a new beginning with those who are left, and they will become a great nation. I will rule over them on Mount Zion from that time on and forever."

Micah was writing this to King Hezekiah and his followers, who found themselves in a tough spot.

The Assyrian army was bearing down on them and their commitment to God really was a matter of life and death, not a momentary cry for help.

The Assyrians came into their territory, trusting in themselves and their military might.

Whereas the Israelites were outrageously outnumbered, yet they trusted in God to be their might.

God was their peace in a world of unease.

We may find ourselves in a tough spot today. This could be due to our health, our finances, our relationships, or the Christmas rush.

Time when rather than feeling peaceful, we are restless. Rather than feeling hopeful, we are worried.

Micah's words are for us too. For a day is coming when the Lord will gather together all His people, as a shepherd gathers his injured and afflicted sheep. This is the reassurance that God has not forgotten us, His people, nor is He unaware of our miserable conditions.

(SLIDE 18)

God is in control and God is on His way. In fact He has already come. In the form of a little baby two thousand years ago.

As I've been reflecting through this season of advent on Jesus entering the world, it's become more and more apparent that He came in the most unexpected of ways and times.

Jesus was born into a world of unease.

He was a baby born into rural poverty under enemy occupation. He was seen as an illegitimate child in less than ideal circumstances.

He left his heavenly dwelling to be born in a messy manger.

I mean, c'mon God. Why a manger? Blogger Frank Powell writes: "This is the Messiah. His arrival should be a slam dunk. The highlight of all highlights. But it's not. You see, God does his work in the ordinary. Transformation occurs in the obscure and often overlooked. The great task before us isn't to look for "the next big thing" but have the mindfulness and awareness to see God's promises in the ordinary and mundane."

Even Jesus' first visitors were not the religious types or political elite of his day. It was a bunch of shepherds and stargazers. Both ordinary and mundane. Both seen as sinful, lowly people.

The shepherds spent their days on the hills looking after their sheep and often had to work seven days a week, so were seen as sinful because they worked on the Sabbath.

The stargazers were Gentiles, foreigners, not part of God's people at all.

Yet it was these two group of people that formed this random welcome party for Jesus.

Shortly after his birth, Joseph and Mary were forced to flee with their newborn to Egypt. So, Jesus became an asylum-seeking refugee. Yep, Jesus was a refugee.

Eventually, they made their way back to Israel and Jesus grows up in Nazareth. Nazareth was like the ghetto, a despised place of which people said "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". A place that Jesus calls home.

So right from the start of his life, Jesus was poor, suffering from political occupation, in need of asylum, and seen as illegitimate.

And this was all God's will for His life. God was in control.

See, right from the start Jesus was an underdog. He then gathered a collection of underdogs and called them his disciples. And fortunately He still calls and comes after underdogs today to be his disciples.

For Micah and his hearers, God was their peace in a world of unease.

(SLIDE 19)

For us today, Jesus is our peace in a world of unease.

As Micah has prophesied: there is a day coming when there will be universal peace. A time when God's Kingdom will reign on this earth. A Kingdom that will be made up of underdogs, the lame, the exiles, the refugees, the despised, sinners saved by grace.

We can have confidence that no matter how difficult or impossible international relationships among nations become or look like, God can bring about peace.

We can have confidence that God can bring his peace into conflicts too at the individual level, between parents and children, husbands and wives, workers and employers, family and friends.

Jesus is our peace in a world of unease.

This is good news for someone like me. And hopefully for someone like you. Even though our lives can often be fraught with stress, confusion and miscommunication, and even though we are going through this busy time of year, let's remember who is on the throne, the true Prince of Peace, and let's hold onto Him and His Words, which are love, faith, hope, joy and peace.

God is in control and He is on His way.

Let's pray.