

*And suddenly there was with the angel multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth **peace** among those whom he favors!"*

Luke 2:14 NRSV

The Advent of Christ is filled with uncertainty, chaos, fear, darkness, even as we light our candles of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. For many this is a time where anything but peace and joy reign. Even hope may be in short supply as this might be the first Christmas without a beloved family member or friend. For some, it is a time of financial strain when we worry about a place to live or how we will put food on the table or how we will address mounting medical bills. For others we live with the knowledge this might be our last Christmas in this dimension. Many just try to get through the season and are firmly in survival mode.

So how do we move from fear and grief to gladness? How do we reach out to others with the light of hope, peace, love, and joy in the face of pain and loss? How do we spread the news that God favors even the lowly shepherd, even me and you? How do we show up this Advent and Christmas season.

Last month Tom Wagner wrote about alternative gift giving. He offered a different way of giving presents. This month I encourage us to be a caring presence. As we offer the good news of Christ's birth, it is important to remember that grief is real, and we can't "cheer" someone out of their loss. What we can do is offer hope by being there, by caring. Some religious communities offer a Blue Christmas service recognizing and embracing the grief some feel in the season. That is one way of being a caring presence. But there are more ways to be present to offer hope, peace, love, and joy to others and to us.

Some try avoiding the season altogether. Avoidance seldom works, as it is a temporary fix. So, how do we find peace or offer peace in this season that often carries trauma and or grief triggers? How can we find the calm that *Silent Night* speaks of?

I think it is important to remember the chaos of the Advent of Christ. It turned many lives upside down, and yet people showed up. They were present.

When I was in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) over 35 years ago, my CPE supervisor told us that the most important thing we could do for others was to be a caring presence. Words don't matter as much as being present, in the moment with someone who is hurting, lonely, scared, or facing a crisis.

A practice I teach and try to live by is mindful living, intentional living, or living in the present. It is so easy to allow the past and present to get mixed up and we find old hurts rising and crippling us. As we seek peace and make peace, it is important to notice what is happening now. To look and see the angels, not as something scary, but as a source of good news. Sometimes we just need to look around and notice the here and now and the bits of heavenly peace we can hang onto in this moment. Maybe part of being present and embracing Christ's presence will mean making peace with a family member you don't see eye to eye with. Maybe

around a dinner table you are able to experience the peace and love of Christ with us. If we are truly going to have peace and justice in our world we start with inner peace and work outward in ripples of hope, peace, joy, and love.

My hope this Advent and Christmas season is that the peace that passes all understanding surround all of us as we practice living in the present and practice being a caring presence. As the words of the hymn state, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." (Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller 1955). Let us enter 2023 looking forward with hope, grounded in the presence of God's love and joy, and working for peace.

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