

November 29, 2023 – 1 Timothy 6:6-9 & Matthew 2:1-2, 9-10

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* These words from Isaiah 9 are some of the most well-known of the Christmas season. My wife, in fact, is wearing a sweatshirt with those words on it this evening. My Christmas stole has them embroidered on one side. We know those names for Jesus so well: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

It's that last one that I want to focus on, however. In fact, we're going to be focusing on it throughout the Advent season. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Jesus is our Prince of Peace. As the angels outside of Bethlehem promised, he brings peace on earth and the goodwill of God towards sinful man. As our bulletin covers proclaim in no uncertain terms, with Christ's birth, “peace came to earth.”

We certainly could use some peace in our lives. I think we all know that much. And we're grateful that Jesus brings it. But in order to really appreciate the peace that Jesus brings, we have to look closely at the reasons why we don't have peace. And that requires us to do something that we don't particularly like doing.

You see, if Jesus in his holiness and righteousness is the Prince of Peace, then that means our lack of peace is probably the result of our sinfulness. Our lack of peace is very often a problem of our own making. One that stems from sin in our life that we don't wish to acknowledge or turn away from.

In fact, a lack of peace in our lives is very often a symptom of idolatry. Because when you make something an idol, you naturally try to serve that idol. You are convinced that this thing is a source of goodness in your life. That if you fear, love, and trust it, this idol will give you good things. It will give you what you want. Whether what you want is good for you or not.

Serving an idol is hard work. A false god may be nothing, but it will leave you exhausted. It will make you bend over backwards to serve it. And what it demands will very often put you in conflict with God's Word, with your sanctified conscience, and with the fellow believers around you. In short, as long as you serve a false god, you will never have peace.

I've been speaking thus far in very general terms, but our Advent series includes some very concrete examples. And our example for this week is the idol of possessions. Possessions are a false god. The stuff that fills our closets and basements and garages. The Amazon boxes piled high on our front porches. Even the gifts that we will be sending and receiving this Christmas season. These can all be idols that steal away our peace.

I think we all know the danger of materialism and consumerism. Charlie Brown has been warning us about it every Christmas for the last 58 years. And yet, we never seem to learn, do we? So let's try listening to St Paul this year and see if he can get further than the Peanuts gang has.

He starts off by writing, *“Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment.”* Which is kind of a funny thing to say. After all, he's essentially saying, “there is great gain by not gaining more stuff.” That's what contentment is. Being satisfied with what you have. Being satisfied with only what you need.

And Paul is pretty adamant about having only what you need. *“If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.”* Can you imagine that? Having the food in your belly and clothes on your back and nothing else. No money. No home. No car. Nothing else.

It sounds terrifying to me. But that was enough for Paul. With just that much, he would be content.

And, in fact, this wasn't a hypothetical for Paul. He spent several years of his life with exactly that much. He spent years sitting in prison with only the clothes on his back and the food that they fed him. He spent years walking from town to town sharing the Gospel, once again with only the clothes on his back, living on the hospitality of those he found in each city. He learned that kind of contentment by living it.

And he learned it by looking at his Lord. Who lived with a similar level of contentment. In fact, for Jesus things like food and clothes were luxuries. After all, Jesus began his earthly ministry without food in his belly, as he fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. And he ended his earthly ministry without clothes on his back, as he was stripped naked and nailed to the cross. Jesus lived without anything, not even a place to lay his head, and yet was content.

Content to do His Father's will. He brought nothing into this world and took nothing out of it. He arrived as a baby in Bethlehem wrapped in cloths and lying in a borrowed manger. And he died on Good Friday wrapped in cloths and lying in a borrowed tomb. And yet, he was content. For he finished the work given to him. The work of our salvation.

Jesus was content. For he was doing the work given to him by his Father. Paul was content. For he was doing the work given to him by His Lord. We are content when we do the work given to us by our Lord. And that work doesn't require a lot of stuff. It doesn't require money or homes or cars. It doesn't require Amazon boxes piled high on the porch.

It only requires the Good News of Jesus Christ on our lips. It only requires the clothing of righteousness that we receive in Holy Baptism and the nourishment of our Lord's Body and Blood in the Sacrament. Man does not live by bread alone. He lives by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.

Anything more has the potential to be an idol. And a dangerous one at that. Paul goes on to say, *"But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."* Paul uses an interesting word there: plunge. That word in Greek is only used twice in the Bible. This is the second time.

The first time is in Luke's Gospel, in the account of the miraculous catch of fish. Where he writes that the catch was so great that their boat began to "plunge." To sink. To drown. They had gathered so many fish that they threatened to drag the disciples and their boat to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee.

I think that's a pretty good image for what Paul is describing here. Our possessions feel like blessings. And, when received with contentment, they are blessings. Until they're... not. Until they become so numerous, until they become such a idol, that they threaten to plunge us into ruin and destruction. And leave us desperate to serve a false god that demands more and more and more.

The wise men who traveled to worship the new king of the Jews knew something about worshipping false gods. They were pagans from the east. Astrologers, searching for answers in the stars. They came to Judea expecting to find an ordinary human king.

But what they found was the Prince of Peace. They found a child worth worshipping, not just as a king but as the one true God, made flesh. And so, *"they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."*

Such that they gave away gifts of incredible value: gold and incense and myrrh. I'm sure Mary and Joseph felt very blessed to receive these gifts. Even more so when those gifts funded their escape into Egypt. But I have to think those wise men felt blessed too. Blessed to give those things away.

Because they didn't need them anymore. They had found something more valuable than all the gold, incense, and myrrh in the entire earth. They had found the savior. A child who was born to take away their sins.

They had found a God who didn't demand more and more from them. But instead a God who gave them the precious gift of eternal life, without asking anything in return. And so they found peace in the Christ child. Peace that no amount of gold, incense, or myrrh would ever give. Peace that no false god could ever offer them.

We think that our stuff gives us security, stability, safety. We think that it gives us pleasure and happiness. We think that if we just have a little more, then we'll be content. But contentment isn't found in the things of this earth. It's not found in money or homes or cars or anything else. Contentment is only found in the Prince of Peace. The one who gives us something worth more than all our possessions. For he gives us his own life. Amen.