

The Advent of Peace

Psalms 130 (NIV)

A song of ascents. ¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; ² Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. ³ If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. ⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. ⁶ I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. ⁷ Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. ⁸ He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Christmas time is one of the most peaceful times of the year as well as one of the most hectic. You're trying to get all your Christmas shopping done and the presents wrapped on time, but once you see them all under the tree, the confirmation that your packages made it to their destinations, your mind is at ease. You drive yourself crazy trying to keep all the December events straight on your calendar and in your head planning accordingly, but when that snow gently falls to the ground, you stop, watch, take a deep breath, and all the stress of deadlines lift for that moment. You frantically clean the house, contact family, buy all the groceries, prepare the food, make arrangements so that everything is just right for everyone to be there, and then after it's all done, after all the food is put away, the guests have left, the wrapping paper is thrown away, and the dishes are clean, you collapse on the couch relaxing, finally having peace.

It's those moments when things are done is when I have peace. I don't have peace when there is unfinished business. If there is something hanging over my head like a due date, a project that has to be accomplished, or an event that has to happen. I don't like sitting still before a service begins; I have to be doing something. Was this same sense of unfinished business hanging over the head of the Israelite pilgrim who wrote Psalm 130?

This psalm is called "a song of ascents." Psalms 120 to 134 all start with this title. These songs were written for people who were going up. What were they going up to? It could have been the going up to Jerusalem since Jerusalem was up on a mountain; they were going up in elevation. The Israelites would "go up" there for their special religious feasts 3 times a year. The "going up" could be the going up of the priests as they were literally going up the steps of the temple, going into the inner courts to perform their priestly duties. This "going up" could have been the going up of the Jewish exiles from Babylon back to their homeland of Jerusalem, a song that they sang now that their punishment was over.

No matter which specific occasion it was, there was something on the mind of the author of this Psalm, something that is universal to all of us. "I'm going up to God. Will he accept me? Have I done enough? Is there still more to accomplish? Am I worthy? Can I stand before him?"

There are so many reasons why God should not let me stand before him. I think I've been pretty good, but I always know that there is more that I could have done. I know that I've been stressed out with Christmas coming and I've taken it out on my family. I tried to connect with my extended family, but I kept running out of time and neglected them. Really, I squandered that time for what I wanted to do instead. I thought I was generous, but I know that I could have done more for others. Actually, I was a bit selfish with my money on Black Friday.

These are the little things, the things that I don't think that people will really care about, let alone God. But then I start remembering the bigger things, the bigger hurts. I remember the fights that I caused. I remember the people that I let down, those I broke my promises to. I remember the people that I refused to help, wanted nothing to do with them. I remember my consistent sins, the ones I rationalized away that it was okay for me to be doing them because of all the other stuff I had going on. And then there are all the things I have done wrong that I don't even remember that I've done wrong: every complaint uttered against a parent, a boss, a coworker, a fellow student; every homework or work assignment neglected, done half-heartedly. It all starts to add up. God, please don't keep tabs on all this.

Does God keep a running tab of our sins? Oh man. "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (verse 3) You sink lower trying to go up to God. Your feet feel heavier trying to trudge up to worship him. Your sin weights you down, drags you under as if you were dropped into the ocean with cement shoes. The weight of my sins when I really start adding them all up is crushing! What can I do?

“Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.” (Verses 1-2) Don’t treat me as I deserve to be treated! Don’t hold me to my record. My record is filled with red, all my sins, all the things I have ever done wrong. It’s too much. I can’t stand before you. I don’t even have a right to ask you, but listen to my cry, my pleading! Have mercy on me! Kyrie eleison!

But there is hope, an expectation of what the Lord will do. “But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.” (verse 4).

When you feel dragged down by sin, crushed by its weight, crushed by our unworthiness, crushed by all your obligations and responsibilities and duties, especially as you are trying to get it all done in time for Christmas, we take that hope and put it in the Lord. We put our hope in the Lord because we know what he has done for us. “Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.” (Verses 7-8)

When we put our hope and our expectation in the Lord, we know that this hope will not fail us because God’s love for us never fails. He never stops loving us. All my crushing sins, they do not stop God’s love. They may make me feel as if they are dragging me away from God, but he continues reaching out. He continues to pull me up out of my sins with his forgiveness. With him, there is constant, full redemption.

Redemption is this activity from God of buying us back, releasing us from the chains of sin that drag us down to the depths. Jesus, by his perfect life lived for you and his bodily sacrifice on the cross, has paid the price for your sins. He posted the payment that released you from your shackles of sin. This is our full redemption from all our sins. We have peace with God because our coming Savior has paid the price, and he keeps no record of our wrongs. This is the Advent of our peace.

Each week with the children’s message, I have explained one of the candles of the advent wreath. So far we have had the Prophecy candle, the Bethlehem candle, and the Shepherd’s candle. They are also called the hope, peace, and joy candles, respectively. For these first three Sundays in Advent, I have tried to keep the message themed to each of these candles: hope, peace, and joy. However, the more I studied and read the Bible readings for each Sunday, the more I found myself flopping between hope, peace, and joy as the emphases. My first sermon was originally titled “Advent of Peace,” but then by Monday night, I had decided it was much more a sermon about joy and changed the theme to “Advent of Joy.” Last week’s sermon was originally “Advent of Joy” because Paul had written, “May the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace as you trust in him.” (Rom 15:13a) The more I focused on that word from God, the more I saw a message of hope. That left me with talking about peace this Sunday, but the peace from God that he keeps no record of my wrongs and with him is unfailing love for me and full redemption – this brings me joy and hope all over again.

That’s really the message of Advent, isn’t it? Hope, peace, and joy are so intertwined. We have joy because the Lord is near – joy that he is near to us, near to help us, near to answer our prayers, near to take us to our heavenly home where we will have eternal, unending joy. Knowing the joy that the Lord is near, we have hope – a sure and certain expectation of what will come, what God will do. We have hope in his coming that he will indeed answer our prayers, hope in our struggles against temptation since he does not set us up for failure or forsake us as soon as we sin again, hope because Jesus has already endured all temptation for us and by doing so has accepted us into his family. This hope, this expectation of forgiveness, gives us peace – a calmness because we know where we stand with God. We stand before God forgiven due to his unfailing love and his full redemption from all our sins. This brings us joy and hope along with his peace which transcends all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

With God, with his forgiveness, it doesn’t matter how hectic life gets around Christmas time. Take this moment, this time here gathered around his Word, to look at his cross and remember that this is God’s unfailing love for you. This is where he gives us full redemption. We are freed from our sins. They cannot drag us down. Instead, the Lord lifts us up. This is our joy. This is where we put our hope. This is the peace we have through what God has done for us. This is the advent of our peace. Amen.