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First Christian Church
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Peace¹

(Second Peter 3:8-11 and 14-15a) "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. 11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,...? 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation....."

(Isaiah 40:1-5, 9) "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.".... 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

I hate to paint. I am possibly the world's worst painter. Whenever someone says "we need to paint" I want to remind him of the quote from comedian Dave Barry: "*As far as I'm concerned,*" Barry says, "*any paint that is already on the wall is by definition better than paint that is not on the wall.*"² I'm not a very good or patient painter, and there is something about my body – or maybe it's my magnetic personality? – that just attracts every possible stray paint drip and droplet. And soon, I find, that the paint is on places where the paint was not meant to be – like my hair, like the bottoms of my shoes, like the one tiny spot that

¹The concept for this sermon is based on a sermon I preached at Stilesville Christian Church, Stilesville, Indiana, on December 10, 1989

²I believe Barry actually refers to "wallpaper" in his line but I am unable to find the quotation – and, more importantly, the point remains the same!

wasn't covered with a drop-cloth. At my church in Hawaii, the property guys quickly noticed that I am a total paint-klutz; and whenever we've had a work day project of painting they learned to have someone watching over me for signs of disaster or they sent me far away from the painting action.

But still, my distaste for painting notwithstanding, sometimes you just gotta paint. And I remember on one of those occasions, many years ago, when I was painting the outside of a house in 95 degree and 95 percent humidity weather that I realized that it wasn't the painting itself that was the thing I disliked most, it was the **preparation** for the painting. If I have to paint, I want to get right to it. I don't want to mess around with scraping, patching, sanding, caulking – all of those things that must come first if the paint job is to last more than a few months. I've learned the hard way more than once that if you don't do that preparation, soon those spots you didn't scrape are now flaking again.

Today is also about "preparation." It is the Sunday in Advent when the church universal celebrates what is known as "Peace Sunday." On this particular Sunday we're invited to focus on how we prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace, the coming of the peace of God into our lives with the birth of Christ. That sounds so lovely, doesn't it. And yet, let's be honest – is there that little voice in you (as there is in me) that sometimes wonders if this sort of preparation for peace isn't a sham? "*Peace on earth, goodwill to all*" can seem, that little voice whispers, oh-so abstract, oh-so far-away, oh-so un-achievable. Preparing for the "Peace of God" and the "Prince of Peace" may seem at times just futile in a world where sometimes war just seems so much more real: war among nations whether in the middle east or the Sudan or in those dozens of other places around the world, war – it sometimes feels like – in our culture and politics, strife in our families even. And so that little voice may say "your preparations are a sham." I know how to prepare a house for painting, even if I don't like to do it, but how do we prepare without that little voice of futility mocking us for the advent of peace that seems so illusory sometimes?

We are not the first ones to ask this very question. Those folks in the congregation to whom Second Peter was writing also wondered about the reality of preparing for peace. Did you hear those very somber words? *“With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. But the day of the Lord **will** come... unexpected as a thief in the night.”* Do you hear the almost *desperate* tone in this? For Second Peter’s community, at the turn of the first century, had also celebrated their Advents, they had also prepared for the coming of the Prince of Peace, they had prepared for warfare to be over. But it hadn’t happened. Time moved forward with more and more persecutions, more and more unrest throughout the empire – not the peace that had been promised. And so, as we can plainly hear in that scripture, their preparations, their expectations, had come to have this brittle and even desperate character to them: *“But the day of the Lord **will** come.... [And] on that day the heavens will disappear..., the elements will disintegrate..., and the earth...will be laid bare.”* But how different, how sadly different, from the vision that the angels had proclaimed: *“Peace on earth, goodwill to all with whom God is well-pleased.”* But Peter’s people were ones who for too many years had prepared for peace and instead been met with too much strife and war. And so their vision of the end has taken on this desperate tone.

So let us not shy away from honestly acknowledging these things – that little voice that whispers that peace is impossible – and honestly, therefore, ask: How **do** we prepare to welcome the Prince of Peace? How **do** we act and what shall we believe in the face of the temptation to think that this is an illusion – a nice and lovely illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. In the face of a world of too much war, how should we prepare for Christ’s coming?

I want to suggest that the answer to that lies in the difference between two very different attitudes: **cynicism** and **skepticism**. Now, sometimes these two words get used

as synonyms but that isn't correct; they do not mean the same thing at all. **Cynicism** is an attitude that which sees no hope at all. The cynic believes that not only is peace unreal and illusory but so are the preparations. The cynic says it is all a sham – a nice, pretty sham, perhaps, but a sham and an illusion nonetheless. The cynic, as the famous and curmudgeonly journalist H.L. Mencken put it, is one who “*when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.*”³ For the cynic, there really is only war – and those times that look like peace are only temporary truces. For the cynic, the world really is ruled by the demons of hate. For the cynic, the words of Advent and Christmas are just a kind of sleeping pill – a soporific that makes us forget for awhile, that anesthetizes us for awhile against the hard realities of an unremittingly unpeaceful world.

But the **skeptic**, on the other hand, refused to be convinced or vanquished by those too often real demons of hate. The skeptic refuses to believe that the power of evil loose in the world has the final say on things. Now, you don't often find preachers counseling you that one of the chief virtues of the Christian life is skepticism. But it is. To be a Christian is to be a skeptic. To be a Christian is to be skeptical of those of the claims of the powers of hate that hurt the world. To be a Christian is to say that evil and hate and indifference and apathy need not be the way things are. To be a Christian is to be skeptical of a culture that would too often glorify or trivialize violence. To be a Christian is to be skeptical of a culture that suggests that your value, your worth, your very self-esteem is only to be measured by how many things, how much money, you have. To be a Christian is to be skeptical of the culture's polarized, sound-bite-ized, practice of acting as if the fact that you love some people means you must hate some other people.

It was, in fact, skepticism that kept the Hebrew alive and energized through their more than three generations of exile in Babylon. It is because they remained skeptical of

³<http://www.basicquotations.com/index.php?cid=233>

the right of Babylon to rule them that they remained **exiles** – rather than simply becoming the newest Babylonians! It was that skepticism that kept them the people of God, kept them identifying themselves as ones whom God had given a mission in the past and would again do so in the future. And that is why they could hope. The vision of Isaiah – every valley lifted up, and every mountain made low – could **reach** them precisely because they had remained skeptics about Babylon and had not simply given in to the powers that had enslaved them.

And so, my friends, likewise I think that the way that you and I prepare for the coming of the Peace of God, the coming of the Prince of Peace, is in fact for us to be **skeptical**. But let me warn you, to be a skeptic takes courage – the courage to use your imagination. Not the kind of imagination that takes refuge in make-believe; no, the kind of imagination that can say no to what is – just like those Hebrew exiles – and to see what might be. It is not an easy task. The work of creating peace and justice in our families, our community, our world does not come just easy just because we wish it. And indeed there are serious differences of opinion about what course or tactic or decision is the right and good and just one. But as we walk through the thickets of those differences, let us continually pray to God that we might indeed have the courage to use the imaginations that God has given us. Let us exercise, even, the sort of imagination that **God** has for the world: for **God** has imagined a day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together; **God** has imagined a day when the world's warfare shall be ended; **God** has imagined a day when peace on earth, goodwill towards all, will be a reality.

But what God wants to know is this: Can **you** imagine it?