

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. My family and I have a **personal family tradition** that we have observed not every year but on a number of them on **New Years Day**. Once we've slept in and recovered a bit from whatever our festivities were the night before, we eat some breakfast and settle in our pajamas on the couch in the living room, and we commence with a movie marathon. A good **New Year's Day Movie Marathon** ideally includes a movies series that has at least three films. We've done Star Wars in the past. At least some of the Harry Potter Films. Pirates of the Caribbean. And after having a year or two off from this tradition, this year, we happened to all be home and free and inspired by the more recent prequel and having teens and tweens who've been reading the books, we decided to kick off 2024 watching **the Hunger Games together**.
- B. As you may or may not know, the *Hunger Games* is a **dystopian story** set in some sort of post-US future nation called **Panem** that is ruled by the elites in their national capital through brutal force. One of the primary expressions of that force is through **a sick kind of sport**, in which districts around the country are forced to send teenage representatives to the capitol where they battle each other to the death in an arena, all for the entertainment of the elites. This cruel practice, along with many others meant to subjugate the districts and keep them from rebelling, are maintained with military might by a set of forces deployed throughout the oppressed districts called **the Peacekeepers**.
- C. It's an ironic name, of course. **"The Peacekeepers" in the Hunger Games are some of the most violent characters imaginable**. They are the ones who force impoverished families at gunpoint to submit their teenage children to be sacrificed. Their presentation is brutal and unforgiving, as they follow orders to shoot dissenters on site or even firebomb whole communities that threaten to disturb "the peace" of Panem. Of course, though the *Hunger Games* is a fictional work, the irony it draws upon is all too real. **What does it mean to "keep the peace"?** Peace for whom? And at what cost? In the fictional world of Panem, the "peace" that the peacekeepers are securing is on behalf of the privileged and powerful in the Capital. **It is a suppression of conflict**, giving those living in the Capital to either wittingly or unwittingly continue oppressing their neighbors without visible resistance. It may have felt "peaceful" to them, but at what cost?
- D. A couple of weeks ago, I shared a theme **I've been feeling stirred perhaps by the Spirit to invite us into** as we begin this year; a theme I find myself pondering at the beginning of a year that looks to be one marked with challenging conflicts both domestically and internationally. **"Blessed are the peacemakers", I've been sensing the Spirit speaking to me**. These words of course come from Jesus himself. **But what does this call of Jesus to make peace actually even mean?** How might Jesus' audience have heard it? How was it different than the kind of peace enforced by the "peacekeepers" of the world? How have Christians understood that call in the past, for better or for worse? And what might it look like today, in a world struggling through growing war in the Middle East and political battles at home, to follow Jesus into this call to peacemaking in 2024?
- E. I'm gonna name from the outset, **I don't have the answers to all these questions**, but just as we did a couple weeks ago in connection with the Epiphany story, I am going to continue inviting us to prayerfully engage in them, hoping that as we dialogue with one another, as we look to sacred texts and history, and as we pray and invite the Spirit to speak to us, we might live into the call to make peace in a world of conflict.

II. (Highlighting the tension)

- A. So today, I want to take some time to look briefly at both **where Jesus calls his followers to making peace, and also where he seems to say something the contradicts that call.** My hope in looking at these two seemingly contrasting sets of sayings by Jesus, is that **holding them together might give us some wisdom that leads to deeper understanding.** Both passages we're gonna look at are found in Matthew, only a few chapters from each other. Matthew's gospel, in a unique way, gives special attention to the ethical teachings of Jesus. Matthew cared that his audience was shaped by how Jesus taught his followers to live. A core part of this teaching is found in Matthew 5 - 7, what we often call the **"Sermon on the Mount"**, though most scholars don't think all of this content was likely shared in any one sermon. It's appearance as one sermon is more like a literary device. If Matthew was living in the era of YouTube, he might have arranged a YouTube video compiling excerpts from a number of different clips - bringing them all together something like **"The Top Ten Teachings of Jesus"**.
- B. It's in the context of this "greatest hits" compilation that we first see Jesus' invitation to make peace. The sermon starts with a list of blessings, called commonly, "The beatitudes".
1. ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.***
 2. ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***
 3. ***"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***
 4. ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.***
 5. ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.***
 6. ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***
 7. ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.***
 8. ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.***
 9. ***"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way."***
- C. So here we have a list of words of blessing and consolation that seem to speak to **how the Divine regards folks**; what God values and where God is present in a particular way. A number of these have **an inherent surprise in them** - they seem to draw a contrast between **multiple kinds of reality** - the kingdom, you might say, of earth - and the kingdom of heaven. In the reality shaped not by earthly political powers but shaped by God, the poor, the mourners, the meek, those hungering and thirsting for righteousness - they are the ones in possession of something sacred, of something eternal, of some deeper comfort and satisfaction. And **in the midst of the call to be merciful, and to be pure in heart, Jesus then issues the call to make peace**, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God," he says. After the blessing on peacemakers, Jesus ends his series of blessing speaking of persecution - the blessing that comes to those who are made to suffer for standing up for "righteousness", and specifically for their association with Jesus.
- D. Now before we think about this passage more, I want to highlight another one that seems to stand in tension with it. This comes just five chapters later in Matthew 10.
1. ***"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword! 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter***

against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, 36 and a man's enemies will be the members of his household."

- E. So...which is it? **Is Jesus the "prince of peace" who blesses the peacemakers and calls them children of God? Or does he come "not to bring peace but a sword"?** I think the only true answer can be both. Jesus' words in Matthew invite us to affirm both statements. Yes, Jesus is indeed the Prince of Peace, but to understand that identity and to live into being ambassadors of it, children of the Divine who participate in following Jesus' way and making peace around us, means understanding what kind of a peace we're talking about. Because, as we saw with *Hunger Games*, "peace" can mean different things to different people. **What was "peace" to the rich and powerful in the capital was violence and oppression to everyone outside of it.**
- III. Perhaps it's helpful for us to remember **the setting in which Jesus spoke all of these words.** Jesus himself was in a historical setting in which there were competing views of peace.
- A. Jesus lived during a time when the whole region of Palestine was under the political control of the Roman Empire. It was a period in history that has come to be known as the **Pax Romana, the "Roman Peace"**. Historians talk about the Pax Romana as a period of about 200 years that was unprecedented in terms of its lack of international war. The period is said to have begun when Augustus took the throne, moving Rome from a Republic to an Empire in 27 BCE, two to three decades before Jesus was born.
1. **In the early years of the Pax Romana, under Augustus, the Roman Empire expanded its territory**, occupying all the regions surrounding the Mediterranean and black seas, including Palestine where Jesus lived. One quarter of the world's population at the time is believed to have been enfolded in the empire during this period. Historians will point to the important benefits and cultural contributions of the Pax Romana, less warfare meant the development of infrastructure that connected the various regions. Roads were developed. A common language - Greek - was transmitted throughout the region. The period was considered to be a golden age of arts, literature, and technology.
 2. **But this version of Roman Peace came with a heavy price tag.** It was a peace enforced by a deep culture of violence. Augustus himself came into power participating in bloody coups in which would-be leaders killed each other. Once he had power, he branded himself throughout the Empire to be a "bringer of Peace" but this peace was maintained by the sword. It was maintained by keeping slaves in their place as an important component of the imperial economic engine. It was maintained by **sanctioning local provincial governors like Herod**, who used violence to intimidate their own people. It was maintained by forced taxation, which extracted resources from those who were living on subsistence means, keeping them unable to challenge the leaders in power. It was **maintained by the legions of Roman Soldiers** stationed throughout the Empire to brutally suppress any would-be rebels, executing them publicly in shameful ways like crucifixion to stoke fear in any others who considered resisting the empire.
 3. **If this sounds a bit like PanEm from the Hunger Games, that's intentional.** The author of the trilogy, Suzanne Collins, used the Ancient Roman Empire as a source of inspiration for her fictional dystopia. This was the historical moment Jesus lived in - the Pax Romana, a period without international warfare might have been called "peace", but it was not the peace that Jesus called his followers to make.
- B. So if it wasn't Rome's vision of peace, **what was Jesus' vision of peace?**
1. To understand that, I think we have to look at the vision of peace that is **developed in the Ancient Jewish tradition** that Jesus was rooted in - the vision spoken to throughout the

Hebrew Bible. In contrast to Roman Peace is the **Jewish concept of *Shalom***. *Shalom* can include the connotation of an absence of war, but its vision is more expansive than that. *Shalom* denotes wholeness; a state of holistic well being. *Shalom* communicates a quality of completion, of health, of safety and prosperity.

- a) *Shalom* is the vision the prophet Micah testified to when he felt called to proclaim on behalf of the Divine:
- (1) ***He will arbitrate between many peoples and settle disputes between many distant nations. They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not use weapons against other nations, and they will no longer train for war.***
 - (2) ***4 Each will sit under his own grapevine or under his own fig tree without any fear. The Lord of Heaven's Armies has decreed it.***
 - (3) This is not a vision of fighting ending because the oppressed finally succumb. It is not a vision rooted in conquest and in cultivating hopelessness in the conquered. This vision of *shalom* sees **neighborliness, respect for the humanity of others, and true justice at its heart**. In this vision, disputes are settled nonviolently, and people can live harmoniously with one another. Each can have what they need - their own vine, their own fig tree - and live without fear.
- b) Contemporary Rabbi Robert Kahn has explained the difference between the first century Roman concept of "peace" and the Jewish understanding of *shalom* this way:
- (1) ***One can dictate a peace; shalom is a mutual agreement. Peace is a temporary pact; shalom is a permanent agreement. One can make a peace treaty; shalom is the condition of peace. Peace can be negative, the absence of commotion. Shalom is positive, the presence of serenity. Peace can be partial; shalom is whole. Peace can be piecemeal; shalom is complete.***
 - (2) This is the kind of peace, the kind of *Shalom*, I believe Jesus was calling his followers to make. Living into this vision of *shalom* is what I believe the Sermon on the Mount was all about.

IV. This past Monday was **Martin Luther King Jr. Day**. In part of my own reflections on Dr. King this week, I found myself reading a sermon Dr. King gave that I think reflects how these two visions of peace manifested in his time. I think they are instructive to us, as we think about how they manifest in ours, as well. The sermon, preached on March 18, 1956 in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville Kentucky was called "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious". In the sermon, King was responding to something which had just taken place in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. A judge had recently ordered that the University of Alabama had to stop denying admission to students based on their race. A brave young woman named Autherine Lucy had been accepted as the first black student there and had attempted to attend classes, but of course she had faced fierce resistance as a group of students, supported by outsiders violently harassed her. King described the situation this way, "*Crosses were burned; eggs and bricks were thrown at her. The mob jumped on top of the car in which she was riding. Finally, the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave for her own safety and the safety of the University. The next day after Autherine was dismissed, the paper came out with this*

headline: *“Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace on the campus of the University of Alabama.”*

- A. What kind of a peace was the University speaking of? King described it this way, ***“It was peace that had been purchased at the price of allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the force of darkness. This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God.”***
- B. In this sermon, Dr. King went on to connect this obnoxious peace with Jesus’ words in Matthew 10, when he confusingly said he came not to bring peace but a sword. For King, this doesn’t negate Jesus vision of what he calls “peace in a higher sense”. It doesn’t negate the vision of shalom, of the Kingdom of God. No, when Jesus speaks this word, he hears Jesus saying, *“I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency.”*
1. For Dr. King, Jesus is calling his followers not to submit to the empire, not to settle for that kind of false peace which pacifies the strong but wreaks as evil in the nostril’s of the God of Justice. He is acknowledging that his presence will bring conflict in order to bring justice. King doesn’t believe Jesus means a literal sword but a spiritual one.
 2. ***“Whenever I come,”*** he hears Jesus saying ***“a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come to declare war over injustice. I come to declare war on evil. Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.”***
 3. In other words, peace is not the Pax Romana, it is the Shalom of the Divine.
 4. King called his followers to resist the pressure to capitulate. In the same way that Jesus encouraged his followers to be resourced by the Divine to combat injustice and live towards a different kind of peace than Rome was proclaiming, King preached non-violent resistance as a mode of peacemaking.
 - a) ***“1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don’t want it.***
2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don’t want it.
3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don’t want peace.
4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don’t want peace. So in a passive, non-violent manner, we must revolt against this peace.”
- C. Nearly seventy years after King preached these words, **they still speak prophetically to realities happening in our time.** In the last week, a bill was put forward in the state legislature in the state of Florida, which if it passed, would mean that **anyone who publicly accused another person of discrimination** - anyone who called out a politician, a business owner, and educator for being racist, or homophobic, or transphobic - could be sued for defamation, and fined a minimum of \$35,000. **This is the same logic of the pax romana.** It’s the same logic as the University of Alabama in 1956 - **it’s a call for peace for the privileged.** Let the white people have their racism in peace. Let the defenders of heteronormative “family values” have their transphobia in peace. **But this is not a just**

peace. This is not the positive presence of the kin-dom of God that King preached. This is not the shalom of Micah that Jesus sought to embody.

- D. Jesus knew his call to the world to live into that holistic, expansive just peace **would cause resistance; it would cause conflict.** The call to justice would even break up family allegiances. How true has the word remained? How many of us have family relationships that have been ruptured in the last decade as the differences in our visions of what a peace full world looks like have been laid bear? Jesus knew this conflict was coming.
- E. He knew the **struggle for true peace would even bring persecution for those who refused to accept the *pax romana*** and committed themselves to securing peace for all, particularly the marginalized. The next line after the blessing for peacemakers in the beatitudes was the blessing on those who were “persecuted for righteousness”. **The word “righteousness” here could also be translated “justice”.** “Blessed are you who make true peace” Jesus said - “you are the representation of the Divine on earth - the children of God. **And when you are persecuted for fighting for justice the kingdom of heaven is yours.”**
- F. When you are **threatened by MAGA extremists**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When you are **defending the capitol from a mob of insurrectionists**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When you are **sued for calling out racism or transphobia in Florida**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When you are **silenced or canceled for advocating for innocent women and children in Gaza**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When as a teacher you are **sanctioned for slipping a banned book to a trans kid who needs it**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When you are **harassed trying to attend class, like Autherine Lucy was**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. When you **bear the punishing weight of *pax romana* in the shape of a cross**, the kingdom of heaven is yours. “Rejoice,” Jesus said, **“for you are standing in the company of prophets that have come before you.” You are in the company of Elijah, Jeremiah, Micah and Martin. And yes, there you are in the company of Jesus.**
- G. Friends, I believe all of us are called this year **not to be *peacekeepers*, but to be *peacemakers in the way of Jesus*.** That may mean at times taking up the sword of ideas. It may mean taking up the sword of a clear, prophetic word. It may mean non-violently resisting the forces of *Pax Romana* in our time to expose the obnoxious false peace that King spoke of, and embody the true just peace of *shalom* that Jesus embodied. I want to end by speaking a hope and a blessing on us all in this work. Friends, as we seek to be these kind of peacemakers this year - may we do so with wisdom to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. May we keep our tongues sharp and our hearts soft. As we examine our motives and purify our own hearts, may we see God in the way Jesus promised. May we be among the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for *justice* - and may - as Jesus promises - that thirst be satisfied. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does the *shalom* Jesus seemed to preach mean to you? How do you imagine it impacting your life and the world around you?
2. Do you have relationships that have been impacted by a conflict between different visions of peace? What has the impact been?
3. What might a call to peacemaking include for you right now?