



## The Man, the Myth, the Legend: Jesus ... Peacemaker

John 14:23-29

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The Alpha and Omega, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, the Savior, the Word ... we use a lot of titles to describe Jesus. Some of the titles we use are Biblically accredited, and thus are easy words to claim when speaking of Jesus. Other titles, like vagabond, or party person, are titles that we may infer based on the way Jesus lived, or the kind of events he attended.

One title that has often seemed odd to me is 'Prince of Peace.' First off, Jesus is nowhere directly given this title. The title is only found in Isaiah 9:6, and we claim it is speaking of Jesus. If you've attended worship during Advent, or the Christmas season, you've likely heard it read. Isaiah writes, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This prophetic writing is claiming a child is to come who will rescue the people of Israel. Yet, between the time of the writing and the birth of Jesus, there were many sons of Israel who were born and rose to be leaders of Israel, some of which were called Counselor, or Messiah – these were titles given to those who protected and championed safety for the Israelites. Jesus wouldn't be born for another 800 years after Isaiah's prophetic writing. But, even if we assume Isaiah is speaking of Jesus, and many (if not most) Christians do, the title of *Peacemaker* still seems odd for Jesus.

Consider the events that surrounded Jesus' birth. Mary, Jesus' mother-to-be felt fear when the angel Gabriel appeared to her to announce her pregnancy. At Jesus' birth, we're told that a host of angels appeared in the sky, and the shepherds, to whom they appeared, were afraid. The battalion of angels that accompanied Jesus' entrance brought fear among those who saw them. The angels sang out, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will toward men ...", which sounds peaceful enough. Yet, awkwardly, these are the very words used to hail the emperor of Rome. When imperial decrees were made on behalf of Rome, the war chants began with these same words, "Glory to the most Augustus Caesar, and peace on earth to those whom god Augustus is well pleased."<sup>i</sup> No wonder the shepherds were afraid. These are not words of peace that the angels bellow – they are words of war.

Let's not stop there – next we see the magi coming to town. On their way into town, they ask the local Roman Lord, Herod, about this new king of the Jews. Herod is incensed, and a couple years later, the Magi having gone home without reporting back, Herod slaughters all the male children of the town. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and yet he instills fear into peoples lives, is introduced with Roman war chants, and elicits mass murders.

But don't stop at his birth, consider his own words. In Matthew 10:35, Jesus says, "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.” Again in Luke 12:51, Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” In many of his teachings, he offers a confrontational perspective. He begins many of his teachings by saying, “You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...” He spends most of his time arguing with historical traditions, and speaking against the normalized teachings of the leaders of the Jewish synagogue.

And yet this is the one we call ‘Prince of Peace?’

Jesus was no less peaceful for the people of his day than he comes across in Scripture. The Jewish people had worked out a deal with Rome - the Romans controlled their land, but they had negotiated a peace with Israel that allowed the Jews to maintain their religious liberty as a people of faith. But when Jesus showed up, when this new ‘King of the Jews’ appeared, it gave hope to many of a revolution. Without question, the Jews wanted to regain their full independence over Rome. Look back through the history books and you’ll find there were a number of revolts by the Jews against Rome, and Jesus gave hope for another uprising.

Truly, it was Jesus’ threat of such uprising that led to his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus was a threat to the Jew’s religious freedom and a political threat to Rome. The claim of the assembly that brought Jesus before Pilate exclaimed, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself was the Messiah, a king.” It was claimed he was a threat to the peace that existed between Rome and the Jews, an upstart king who sought power, and one who spoke against supporting the ruling government. How much more peaceful are things when dissenters are kept silent about their discontent of the structures of politics and power.

Even the disciples had hope for Jesus to be the kind of war hero they expected of the Messiah. They wanted a stallion riding, armor wearing, sword wielding hero that would be their knight in shining armor, who would once more rally the Jewish forces to secure full control of the Promised Land. Retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon notes, “As everybody knows, there is no way to get anything really important done without swords. That’s why we have the largest military budget of any nation in the world – to achieve security and then preemptively to spread peace and freedom everywhere. What war has been waged except from the very best of motives. To call Jesus a ‘Prince of Peace,’” Willimon goes on, “is an oxymoron. A political leader who doesn’t make war when national security is threatened is no prince. Any peace that is based on anything other than a balance of military power is inconceivable.”<sup>ii</sup>

This commonly held belief that power and might are the way of peace is why the privileged world has such a hard time comprehending Jesus. Though his entrance into the world elicited fear among others, though he knew his presence would divide families, though he knew his teaching would cause dissention, for as much violence and bloodshed resulted from Jesus’ incarnation, none of it was initiated by him.

Through all four accounts of Jesus’ life and teaching in the Bible (in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Jesus never once gives permission or authorizes violence. In fact, Jesus does quite the

opposite. Jesus says that if someone hits you on the right cheek, you should turn and make the other available too. He said if someone robs you and steals your cloak, you should give them your tunic too. He tells us to pray for our enemies, and to bless those who persecute us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches about nonviolence, nonretaliation, and forgiveness.

And give credit to Jesus – Jesus isn't teaching these things, he isn't calling us to nonviolence and forgiveness, because he thinks that if we just forgive our enemies it will bring out the best in them. I think in this way, we try to pervert Jesus' teaching and we misuse Martin Luther King Jr's claim that "hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." Jesus doesn't think that if you can just be nice to the person aiming a gun at you that they'll drop the gun and sing *Kum ba yah* with you. Remember, Jesus calls on God to forgive the Roman soldiers *even while they crucified him* – not because he hoped they would bring him down from the cross, but rather, because Jesus knew that such peace exemplified the way of God.

This is the emphasis of Jesus' teaching in our text today, which comes near the end of Jesus' ministry with the disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It comes in the midst of a lengthy farewell discourse in John's Gospel, where Jesus is trying to summarize and offer a closing benediction on his three year's of ministry with the disciples.

Jesus names that his departure is not to be seen as an ending, but rather a new beginning. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you," he begins in verse 25, "but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

He then offers this claim of peace, "My peace I leave you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Jesus' promise is an interesting one because it challenges our understanding of peace. Too often, I think, we equate peace with the *lack* of conflict, or the *absence* of turmoil. When we think of peace in this manner, we are claiming there is peace because of what is missing. Yet, "Jesus offers more than the absence of something negative."<sup>iii</sup> For Jesus, peace isn't about there being no disagreement, or no dissention. For Jesus, peace isn't about us all having the same opinion or thoughts on all hot topics. For Jesus, "peace connotes a sense of contentment, but even more fulfillment, a sense that in this moment one is basking in God's pleasure."<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus' teaching makes more sense in the Jewish cultural context, in which (unsurprisingly) this teaching was first offered. Peace as Jesus teaches is a reference to the Hebraic word *shalom*. It's not about world peace, or a 1970's offering of "peace, dude," or even a promise that life will be trouble-free. *Shalom* positively refers to the blessing of the Lord that results in wholeness – in completeness. As theologian Fred Craddock puts it, "the peace of God is the confidence that God is God and neither our gains nor losses are ultimate."<sup>v</sup>

This understanding of peace is challenging to accept in today's age. "Worldly attempts at justice always involve the strong imposing their wills upon the weak. In crying for justice, the weak are

usually demanding power to work their wills upon the strong.”<sup>vi</sup> It is this worldly attempt at justice through power that has made the past week’s election, and the months of political campaigning and advertising leading up to it, so unbearable. In our two party society, we’ve pitted one against the other, with each side thinking, “If *my* side can just have the majority hold of the Senate and Congress, we’ll be in a better place.” As if either side winning control wasn’t made possible through financial donations of the powerful who just wanted more control and more power. Those close elections we watched on the edge of our seats Tuesday night, and the few that still have yet to be called, and the few that will be recounted – they are all the result of millions upon millions of dollars being spent by partisan political parties seeking control. When the reality is, as Willimon states it, “People in power tend to act the same, despite why they got there. All of which explains why Jesus never got along well with [ruling elders], religious or otherwise.”<sup>vii</sup>

Again, as Jesus was often pushing against the peace that had been structured by the powerful in the Israeli-Roman world, there’s a reason Jesus said that a person must become like a child to enter the kingdom of Heaven – there’s just no place for power hungry folks who want the power for themselves in the presence of the Lord Almighty.

The kind of peace we are offered by a two-party world conflicts with Jesus. You hear it said, “If my party wins, peace will be made possible. If the other party wins, watch out, because we are all doomed.” But Jesus says, “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Perhaps in this way, calling Jesus the *peacemaker* is not the right title. For through his teaching, and his actions, Jesus isn’t really *making* peace. Living according the example of God stands in such stark contrast to the way of the world, that it may be difficult to *make* peace when we are governed by worldly entities. Perhaps it would be better to call Jesus the *peace-giver*. “My peace I give to you,” Jesus assures. ... “This gift of peace (like the peace we extend to one another following the prayer of confession and pardon) is bound up with all that makes for righteousness or right relation: love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and thanksgiving.”<sup>viii</sup> It’s not a peace we can create, it is only a peace we can receive.

There are many that will tell you that if we can just get the balance of power right among the ruling nations of the world, peace will be possible. But the balance of power will always claim that the other is the enemy, and that those across the border or of varying beliefs are potential threats and should be seen as adversaries. We will never be able to truly love our neighbor so long as we deify the state. We are only able to love one Lord at a time. We must first get God right – we must know God as love in Jesus Christ for us to really love our neighbor as a child of God.

But this is the *good news!* The joy we proclaim as disciples of Christ is that we *do not* have to have the answers – we do not have to be able to *make* peace – we do not have to control power – we do not have to make up authority for ourselves. Jesus promises that the Spirit is given to sustain us, to teach us, and to remind us of the peace-giving of Jesus. And because of

this gift, we do not have to grieve Christ's death and crucifixion at the hands of human powers – we do not have to worry that because of Roman capital punishment that God has left and we are lost. Christ's death, his resurrection, and his ascension to the Father are reminders of God's greatness – of God's power – of God exemplifying peace through eternal love. So may you receive the greatness of true peace – not peace from, but peace *with* the eternal love of God, the Lord, who assures us that we can be the presence of God's peace in a world of turmoil because we are *gifted* such peace in the presence of the eternal Spirit.

For the glory of God, may we live as those who have been gifted peace, and share in the peace-giving life of Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon. *Proclamation and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> William Willimon. *Why Jesus?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved November 8, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Lose.

<sup>v</sup> Richard F. Ward. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Willimon. *Why Jesus?*

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.