



Despite Differences and Rules

Taste and see that the Lord is good. —Psalm 34:8

In light of our theme “The Things That Make for Peace,” we might ask, “What are the foundational pieces for achieving the triangular sweet spot when all is well between a person, their neighbors, and God?” This is not only a Christmastime question; it’s an *always* question. It seeks expression in every action of our personhood. Shalom is rooted in the actions of Christ-followers on an ongoing basis.

But that conclusion seems a little dry, like toast served with dried fruit for breakfast. Sure, it’s adequate, but it needs some flavor! So, a delicious story.

On a Sunday away from my usual responsibilities at Community CRC in Kitchener, Ontario, I attended a worship service at St. Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church. The building they were using had previously belonged to the congregation I was serving. It was also the very church building I had grown up in as a child attending church and Sunday school. It felt like a homecoming, except that it was all very different.

Practices were different (they have separate sections for men and women in the sanctuary), many points of biblical understanding were different (for example, the role of saints), the use of elements was different (they use holy smoke and holy water), and the language of worship was Coptic. Yet, despite so many differences, when my family and I walked into the church that Sunday morning, we were greeted with warmth. In a setting where we stood out as the oddity, shalom happened.

Noticing us as different, the church members delighted in *allowing their hospitality to*

trump any differences between us.

These warm Egyptian-background Christians allowed our family to sit together in the pew, male and female. They ensured that translated material was available. They allowed us to participate in communion. With a broad smile, the priest made sure that we were sprinkled with the holy water he was “throwing.” He also gifted us with a warm loaf of ornate communion bread to take home. He even invited me to address the congregation and then to take a tour of the building, including the “holy places,” to see how the church had changed. Finally, our family was invited to the fellowship meal after the service with the entire church body.

Here’s the point: they practiced *hospitality*. In every way, they exercised a welcome into their space despite differences and rules. So generous in hospitality were they that I consider it one of the richest church experiences of my life. They created triangular peace between us and them and the God whom we serve. Shalom!

The biblical “thing that makes for peace” is hospitality. Some say the entire Bible is about hospitality. God welcomes us into the home he created, gives gift after gift (even his Son), and continues in fellowship with us by his Spirit. Maybe that’s why the Bible uses hospitality language to describe our relationship to him. “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8).

As God exercises hospitality, so are we called to do the same. Hospitality, foundational for peace. Pass it on.

Prayer

Lord, help us to be more hospitable despite our differences. Help us to find peace with ourselves, our neighbors, and you. May we reflect you in the way we welcome others into our lives. Amen.

Darren Roorda is the director of Canadian Ministries for the CRCNA.



Peace in the Storm

Thus says the Lord:

*“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip,
and bounced upon her knees.”*

—Isaiah 66:12 (ESV)

It’s raining. It’s the kind of rain that falls every December in Honduras: heavy, messy rain. It stings the skin and plasters clothes to the body; it turns streets into muddy, churning rivers.

“Peace . . . like a river . . . like an overflowing stream.”

I just want to get home, get inside. My umbrella inverts. I lose a shoe in the ankle-deep current and have to chase after it. This isn’t my idea of peace.

I imagine on that lake in Galilee it was raining like it does here. The fishermen and their city friends choked on the water and hurried to wake Jesus. “Lord, save us!” they cried. “We’re going to drown!” (Matt. 8:25).

It’s Christmastime here in Honduras. There are trees set up in the shopping malls. There are lights up on the main streets. Everywhere people are serving *toreja*, sweet bread in honey—and all the while gangs are extorting businesses, people are getting shot, children are fleeing the country in fear for their lives.

Violence touches every community. Corruption has spread like a mold through the

government. Those who have power abuse it, and see no wrong. I see hatred. I see darkness. I see violence and impunity. And I cry out: “Lord, save us! We are going to drown!”

Sometimes we think that peace is the absence of trials and struggles, that if Jesus is with us we shouldn’t have to weather storms. When rain gets in our eyes, we take it as a sign that we have steered in the wrong direction, or that we haven’t had enough faith.

The promise of Jesus, though, isn’t a life without storms, but peace through them—the knowledge that, drenched and scared as we might be, we will not be alone.

“Why are you so afraid?” Jesus asked his disciples, rubbing the sleep from his eyes (Matt. 8:26).

Working for peace is weary work. The storms sometimes soak us, but we will not be afraid. And sometimes even these storms we face can be a purifying force. The wind and waves that beat down on us can be the same ones that sweep away the dirt and trash from the beaten-down roads. I am halfway home when the rain stops.

The water slowly drains from the street. Waterlogged chip packets and soda bottles line the sides of the road, swept by the river of rainwater downhill out of nooks and crannies where they were hiding. Tomorrow someone will come by with a broom and sweep the trash away.

It’s evening. The night is preternaturally calm. And I feel it: a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoicing. It’s Christmastime here in Honduras. And I’m at peace.

Prayer

Dear God, I pray for peace throughout the storms and trials that confront us. I pray that these storms will be a cleansing force, loosening the detritus of corruption and oppression and bringing them to light. Strengthen us and comfort us as we seek peace in our surroundings, at times relinquishing our comfort but never forgetting your peace.

Katerina Parsons is the director of communications for the Association for a More Just Society.



Under the Radar, Always Active

Thus says the Lord:

*“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip,
and bounced upon her knees.*

*As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;*

you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;

your bones shall flourish like the grass;

and the hand of the Lord shall be known to his servants.”

—Isaiah 66:12-14 (ESV)

On Wednesdays I go to St. Paul’s, an Anglican Church clinic in western Uganda. Early in the morning, nearly 100 HIV-positive men and women awake and walk from their homes to this cluster of white buildings. Their bodies, in various stages of disease, are waging a fierce viral battle beneath the surface. As a result, they often wage a fierce battle of stigmatization and fear that is much more visible. On Wednesdays they come to St. Paul’s to receive a health lesson, a checkup, additional HIV drugs, and some peace.

My boss is a sunny, soft-spoken woman and the head of this outreach program. She also is a steadfast peacemaker in the clinic. She communicates, she hugs, she facilitates, and she smiles regardless of the internal and external battles her patients face.

Waiting in the treatment line one week, an elderly woman shared a story from years back when she relapsed on treatment. She developed a bad secondary infection and was sick, alone, and afraid in her home far from town. My boss, noticing her absent from the weekly clinics, made her way to the patient's home one day after work. She told the woman she missed her, and she wanted to make sure she was okay. They shared a cup of tea; they chatted. The next week my boss went to personally bring the woman to that Wednesday clinic.

Peacemaking in the space I occupy in Uganda often looks like this. It's not flashy. It's under the radar. And it could often be mistaken as simple neighborliness. However, it is also always active; it *makes, seeks, and pursues* wholeness and healing for the community's weary souls.

This is how peacemaking is often supposed to be, I think. In our culture we tend to confuse peace with the absence of tension. But Jesus' actions demonstrate that a posture of peace should be active and that it will likely encounter much tension and despair. Our Prince of Peace spends a lot of time with the sick, the left out, and the bereaved. And his peace, often supplied by something as simple as sharing a neighborly meal, is always active as it seeks wholeness and healing for all the community's weary souls—the wholeness that will come with his future kingdom.

Next Wednesday my boss will come back to the clinic. She will greet each person by name, ask about their children, and hold their hand. She will answer questions tirelessly. She will be an active neighbor. And she will bring some measure of peace to victims of a violent disease. I'm trying to learn to do the same.

Prayer

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teach us this and every day to be steadfast peacemakers, peace seekers, and peace pursuers. Help us to be active and to follow your example of simple, neighborly, steadfast love to seek wholeness and healing for our communities' weary souls.

Katy Gerber is an HIV/AIDS program officer for the Mennonite Central Committee in Kasese, Uganda.



Making Peace, Not Violence

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. —Colossians 1:19-20

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has a theory about violence. He says violence is more than the thrown punch or the crack of the gun. These are indeed moments of violence, but they are relatively rare, as violence goes. Much more common is the violence that is unseen but ever-present beneath the surface, pulsing through economic practices, political institutions, and communities across the world. The moment that violence becomes visible is the moment that the underlying, systemic violence has bubbled over. It is the moment when systemic violence can be identified, named, and rooted out. It is the moment when peace can be made.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s understood this theory of violence well. The era was rife with manifest violence—think Edmund Pettus Bridge, fire hoses, police dogs. Many detractors, and even would-be allies, accused civil rights leaders for their tactics, claiming that they incited violence. What Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and Jesse Jackson understood, however, is that their actions were merely exposing the violence that was already operating under the surface. The violence of economic exclusion. The violence of housing discrimination. The violence of educational segregation. The violence of a national imagination that proclaimed “all men are created equal” in one breath, and cried “separate but equal” in the next.

Now Žižek has me thinking about Standing Rock. A lot of things lately have me thinking about Standing Rock. In case you’ve missed it, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of southern North Dakota has been blocking the construction of the Dakota Access

Pipeline for months. They say they are protecting their water, their air, their sacred lands, and the climate—all of which stand to suffer from the pipeline project. But I'm starting to think they are doing something more.

I'm starting to think they are making peace.

If violence is always already at work in our political, economic, and cultural systems, then it could be said that the default of our current world is violence. And if violence is antithetical to peace, then the efforts at “keeping the peace”—as our cultural nomenclature so naively puts it—are doomed to fail. Peace cannot be kept until it is made. Actively, intentionally, sacrificially made. Made by standing up to systems that would seek to do violence against the earth and against minority cultures. Made by putting our bodies between the oppressor and the oppressed. Made by naming and resisting the violence always at work within our economic, political, and cultural systems.

The work of making peace requires going toe to toe with the powers and the principalities that thrive on systemic violence. It requires exposing this violence for all the world to see by drawing it out into the light.

If we join the Standing Rock Sioux water protectors and civil rights activists in the work of making peace, some will call us troublemakers. But take heart. We serve One who was also called a troublemaker. One whose table-flipping, cross-carrying, violence-exposing peacemaking threatened the empire of violence enough to earn him a death sentence. One whose sacrificial life and death made the ultimate peace. One who sends us his Spirit to empower us to join him in the work of making peace in a world gripped by violence.

Let's get to work.

Prayer

Lord, send us your spirit. Make us righteous troublemakers. Help us actively, intentionally, and sacrificially work towards peace in the midst of so much violence.

Kyle Meyaard-Schaap is the national organizer and spokesperson for Young Evangelicals for Climate Action.



Peacemaking—a Holistic Enterprise

“Blessed are the peacemakers; for they will be called children of God.”

—Matthew 5:9

The Bible is filled with wisdom about the task for peacemakers whom Jesus called “blessed” and “children of God” (Matt. 5:9). In fact, the Presbyterian Church (USA) prepared a devotional series featuring a Bible passage on peacemaking every day for three years, and not one passage was repeated.

One of the important discoveries of that series of devotions is that God calls all of us to be peacemakers in all of life. There are examples of peacemaking in oneself—claiming the peace that only God can give (Rom. 5:1-11). Looking at the story of Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 45; 50), peacemaking in families is challenging but also profoundly rewarding. And peacemaking in the community is exceedingly important as we work for justice for all of our neighbors.

As Genesis 2:15 makes clear, we are called to take care of God’s earth, ensuring its peace—a task that is both timely and challenging in light of today’s changing climate. What’s more, making peace on a worldwide basis is critical work, ensuring that war between God’s children is always the last resort and never the first. In a world that has nuclear weapons and drones and a myriad of other weapons, it takes strong faith, hope, and love to engage in peacemaking.

Reformed people are clear that peacemaking is the human response to God’s gift of peace. Whenever or wherever there is brokenness, God gets there first, healing the brokenness and calling us to join in the work of peace-giving. By participating in God’s

peace-giving work, we become peacemakers in all of the contexts of our lives.

We don't pick and choose where God calls us to do peacemaking. As Christian disciples, we may be called to be peacemakers in all of these contexts.

Prayer

O God, we want to join you in your peace-giving throughout the world. Give us the wisdom, faithfulness, and courage for that task. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Rev. Richard Killmer is a special representative of the Office of Social Justice of the CRCNA.



Beautiful Actions of Faith

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. —James 2:14-17

If we think of peace in the broader sense of *shalom*—that is, peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, well-being, flourishing, and tranquillity—then peace includes living out all the implications of our faith in Jesus Christ. With that in mind, here's a paraphrase of James 2:14-17:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister uses a wheelchair. If one of you says, "They are welcome at our church," but your church provides no ramps, no pew cutouts, no accessible bathrooms, what good is your faith? Suppose a fellow church member has hearing loss but your congregation provides no way for her to hear what is happening in the worship services or other gatherings, how can she participate? Maybe a stroke survivor at your church can no longer speak. If the rest of the congregation writes him off instead of taking initiative to find new ways for him to contribute to the life of the body, are you really living out your faith? Does a member with mental illness know she is loved, even though her depression often keeps her from worship and other church events? Do others offer to read the church bulletin and newsletter to members who have vision loss? Does the boy with autism know he truly belongs with the rest of your congregation? Does your church offer respite for tired families who care for their kids with disabilities day in and day out? Does your church

work to show your community that people with disabilities are truly welcomed and embraced? If not, what good is your faith? Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead, but faith that is accompanied by action is a beautiful offering of love toward God and other people.

Prayer

God, give us, fellow church members, and our church leaders the understanding and will to put our faith into action. In Jesus, Amen.

Rev. Mark Stephenson serves the CRC as director of Disability Concerns.



Showing Hospitality

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. —Hebrews 13:1-2

You can paint a grim picture of the United States-Mexico border and many other places around the world, but just like the Star of David shining in the night, so shines Shalom House in the Arizona desert.

Working with Mennonites and Quakers, it is evident that peace and nonviolence make up the cornerstone to life. Through my work with the Mennonite Central Committee in Mexico I have the sincere pleasure of interacting with a Mennonite couple living on the Mexico-Arizona border. These lovely people are Jack and Linda, and their favorite place to meet people is around their table to break bread.

During one such occasion, Jack told us about his and Linda's motivation to create Shalom House—a refuge for those who are in need of a safe place to be while they transition to a more stable situation. The motivation is in their belief that “the answer to violence is not non-violence; it's hospitality.”

In a global climate of violence that seems increasingly on the rise, we need to open our doors without fear, knowing that God is present.

Advent is a season of waiting, of hopeful expectancy—knowing that Jesus has already come but that his kingdom is not yet fully here. We can work to have his “kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven” by being agents for peace (Matt. 6:10; see 5:9). We can *actively* wait by pulling up another chair to the table and allowing the stranger

to enter our house, our community, our country. We may just be inviting an angel in!

May the peace of hospitality shine in all our homes.

Prayer

Prince of Peace, give us courage to open our doors and sit at the table with ALL—our sisters and brothers, immigrants, refugees, politicians, enemies, friends. May the Holy Spirit be present this season and always as we create peace through hospitality. Amen.

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Struggling, but Shining

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the holy One of Israel, your Savior.” —Isaiah 43:2-3

Theresa and her family live in South Sudan, the world’s newest nation, which has been at war almost since its birth. Over the past three years, more than a million people have fled the bloodshed, 50,000 people have been killed, and 25 percent of children under five years old have become malnourished.

In this havoc, Theresa embodies the words of Isaiah 43. She attends a women’s trauma-healing group through World Renew’s partnership with the Sudanese Reformed Church. It is a new community of believers that is struggling in desperate conditions—but shining with God’s anointing.

Through the church, women like Theresa are repairing broken relationships in their community. They are nurturing their families and raising loving children in a society where resentment, fear, and hatred have become the norm. As they heal from trauma, they begin to reconcile with God, with each other, and with people in other communities.

In South Sudan, peace means justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and shalom. We use these words every day as we equip churches and women’s groups. We see glimpses of God’s kingdom in group members who are nurturing peace among their families and communities in a country where hatred and ethnic tension have reached

epidemic proportions.

World Renew and the Sudanese Reformed Church teach healing, peace, and reconciliation through the example of Jesus Christ. The preaching of God's coming kingdom brings powerful encouragement in times of conflict and suffering. Jesus is the foundation and essence of this ministry, and the faith of the people we work with is the engine that drives us forward.

Many South Sudanese churches are working for peace. They influence their politicians and military leaders through lobbying. They encourage forgiveness, reconciliation, and shalom to grow, blossom, and bear fruit. The conditions are harsh, but God is at work here; the worse the conditions, the more the church suffers, and the more it grows.

We have all become peacemakers. We pray for peace, and we work for reconciliation. This is a slow process, and we need your prayers so that hope shines through even when setbacks and new violence occur. The women of South Sudan need special prayers as they face frequent violence and persistent poverty.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. . . . And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:2, 6)

That is where we are. We are seeing the great light that has dawned.

Prayer

God, we pray for peace in South Sudan. May your light continue to shine through the ministry of the church as it does the work of justice and reconciliation. Give your people hope and strength to do this work even when challenges arise. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. May we soon see your light in full.

Hedd Thomas is the country representative in South Sudan for World Renew.



Practicing Peace

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. —Philippians 4:9 (NRSV)

I failed only one class in my life: band. In sixth grade. My grade was entirely based on a piece of paper that had to be signed by my parents—showing that I had practiced my trumpet for 15 minutes every day. I hadn't. They wouldn't sign it. I got a 17 percent that semester. I also quit playing the trumpet.

Practice has never been my strong suit. I'm fairly bad at things that require intentionality, determination, and adhering to a schedule.

I was recently reminded by someone wiser than me, when discussing how to cope with a new world which seems to be teeming with harassment and hate, that the heroes of the Civil Rights movement did not simply become nonviolent in the moment of their protest. It wasn't an instinct; it was a practiced skill.

They met weekly, together enacting scenarios in which they would be faced with violence, and developed their instincts. They honed their craft. They practiced nonviolence like some people practice push-ups or flashcards or the trumpet.

How do we become people of peace? We act peaceful, over and over.

One thing that I've learned from [Restorative Practices](#) is that most faith communities have never committed themselves to an overt practice of trust-building and relationship-strengthening. We all agree that we want it, and that it's vital to the functionality of the church, but we lack a plan to get there. So when a conflict arises,

we have no muscle memory for confronting, for listening, for expressing our needs, for addressing the hurt that was caused. It's as if we somehow believe that we should just naturally know how to do this, because we follow Jesus. But we don't know how.

So, I fear, church has become a very unlikely place to learn how to make peace—because our practice when conflict comes is to avoid, deny, or change our membership to the church around the corner. But imagine a congregation that saw conflict—disagreements over worship music, over LGBT inclusion, over politics, over how money is spent—as an opportunity instead of a threat. Imagine a congregation that had become so accustomed to everyone's voice valued and sought-out, even when those voices were saying very different things, that they knew how to move forward even when the stakes were very high.

If a practice is not overt—enacted, pursued, embodied—it does not exist.

“Keep doing the things” that look like Christ, Paul tells us. Perhaps it's time to recommit the practice of peacemaking, not just to pray that we receive this virtue.

Prayer

Lord, help us to begin the practice of peacemaking today—in our homes, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods. Help us to be creative and determined so that a million small rehearsals can turn us into confident performers of a symphony of peace—even in a world of violence. Amen.

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Life after Death

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” — Matthew 5:9-12 (NRSV)

In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till desperately wanted to leave his home in Chicago and spend the summer with his cousins in Mississippi.

Mississippi in 1955 was a dangerous place, especially for blacks. White supremacy operated with impunity. Of all the states that resisted the Civil Rights Movement, none were more persistent and violent than Mississippi. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, passed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, had made school segregation illegal and had galvanized Southern opposition to all efforts at integration. The city where Emmett wanted to visit, Money, was extreme even by Mississippi’s standards. The typical signs of segregation that populated the landscape of the Jim Crow South were not necessary in Money—people knew what was expected and knew what lines not to cross. For someone coming from the outside, however, things might not be as obvious.

Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till, a young schoolteacher, prohibited the trip at first, fearing for her son’s safety in the violent South. However, his insistence won her over—she allowed him to go, but only after a difficult discussion about racial segregation and the mistreatment he would encounter.

On August 21, 1955, Emmett arrived in the city of Money.

One week later, Mamie received a phone call from a relative: Emmett was missing.

Emmett had been hanging out with friends and was accused, perhaps falsely, of whistling at a white female, a taboo in a world where interracial relations of any kind were often punishable by death. The white woman's husband and brother-in-law grabbed Emmett from his home in the middle of the night, abused him in a horrific fashion, and dumped his mangled body into the river.

The two men were charged for the murder and even bragged about their actions, but an all-white jury took only minutes to declare them not guilty.

Mamie returned to Chicago after the court case. No son. And, now, no justice. What would she do?

She decided to make peace. Mamie took students from her school and church and formed a group known as the Emmett Till Players. She taught them the art of rhetoric as they memorized speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., speeches they would perform all around the nation.

Today, these students are pastors, teachers, lawyers, and business leaders. Generations of young women and men were given hope by this Civil Rights icon who refused to let the hatred of a toxic world infect her soul.

Let us lament what we have done to God's good creation. Let us mourn those who experience deprivation and suffering. And then, let us roll up our sleeves, pursue justice, and make peace.

Prayer

In the same way that the crucifixion of your only begotten Son was a doorway to peace for the world, O God, so let us take the injustices that occur daily and transform them into movements for peace on earth. Amen.

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Peace When There Is No Peace

"From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them," says the Lord. —Jeremiah 6:13-15

We live in a broken world where many people cry out for peace but cannot find it. Why is there no peace? Paul Collier in his book *The Bottom Billion* explains that 73 percent of the bottom billion people in this world, who live in extreme poverty (less than \$2 a day), have recently been in, or continue to be in, a civil war. There is a vicious cycle that feeds poverty, he says, since these civil wars last for an average of seven years, reduce growth by 2.3 percent a year, and cost a country and its neighbors an average of 64 billion dollars. Collier finds that countries with a low level of income, slow economic growth, and/or dependence on primary commodity exports are most prone to civil war.

Justin is a young man from South Sudan who knows the depth of crying for peace during civil war. Violent acts from major conflicts took the life of eight of his relatives this year. Who can imagine losing so many loved ones in one year? Even for World Renew staff, the high level of war and insecurity has resulted in leaving their work in Yei in South Sudan. Most of our national staff now live in refugee camps in Uganda.

How will you respond to these cries for peace? God calls us to serve as his hands of mercy and feet of justice. We offer essential humanitarian assistance of food, water, and shelter for refugees. We guide churches in their efforts to support refugees

coming to Canada and the United States. We train leaders of churches in South Sudan in trauma healing and reconciliation, motivated by peace in Christ. And yet, more needs to be done to advocate for long-lasting peace. That means encouraging every citizen in Canada and the U.S. to pray for peace and good governance. It means appealing to political leaders to enact fair-trade policies and practices as well as to forgive debts that keep a country like South Sudan in perpetual economic crisis.

Peace, I have come to realize, is really the river of justice flowing out of love. It's all about the love that God has to give but that doesn't always reach us or the people we serve because we have accepted the building of dams of injustice, isolation, and broken relationships in our lives and between communities around the world. When all of the love that God has to offer continues to gather up in his eyes with no other place to go, I can only imagine that his unending tears begin to flow.

During this Advent season, I am deeply touched by the reminder of God's enormous gift of love, sending his own Peace Child so that we can have peace with him when there is no peace in the world. Even more, I am inspired to repent of greed and deceit, to give generously, and to advocate for just policies that change the story of war to his story of peace. How about you? How will you respond and pass the peace of Christ to your neighbors around the world this Christmas season and in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the love you show us through the gift of your Son. May the knowledge of this gift give us strength to seek justice and peace even when it feels impossible. Bring your peace, healing, and reconciliation to South Sudan. Amen.

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo is the director of World Renew – Canada.



Thank You, Jesus

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. —Colossians 1:19-20

There is a great peace that comes in family traditions. In the noise that kicks off the Christmas season in the United States, my Advent begins with quietly hanging the felt Advent calendar made by my mother. It portrays a Christmas tree with a small stable and a present nestled underneath. There are 24 pockets at the bottom, each holding an ornament to hang on the tree or a figure to be placed in the stable scene. The present has a small slit in it so that it can hold baby Jesus inside. The baby will be the last item to be placed on the calendar, as our gift from God. Even though no candy is involved in this tradition, there is sweet delight in choosing the ornamental piece to hang up each morning and in doing the countdown to Christmas Day, when baby Jesus will emerge and take his place as “the greatest gift of all.”

As a little girl, I had to take turns with my siblings so that each would have a chance to choose an ornament or figure to hang up. As the favorites were chosen, I would privately walk past the calendar to calculate and recalculate if we were on schedule and, more importantly, if I would be the one who would get to take baby Jesus out of the present and place him in the manger.

As a mother, I still pause as I walk past the calendar to make calculations. With four children out of the house and a teenager who is no longer interested, it has come down to the delight of our seven year-old to carry on the family tradition. Sometimes the mornings are so rushed that we forget and need to hang an item up at dinnertime,

or to do two the next day. So I count to see if we are on track.

I find myself reaching out to check if baby Jesus is inside the present. The little bump I feel reassures me that he is not lost, nor has anyone taken him away from his safe waiting place. I don't know why I do this. I can't remember a time that Jesus disappeared from the Advent calendar. I have searched my memories to think if my older brother may have played a joke on me one year. I have tried to remember if my younger sister ever took baby Jesus to play with, or lost him and caused my mother to have to sew a replacement. I don't have any such memory. Yet I am compelled throughout Advent to check that baby Jesus is there.

Thank you, Jesus, for always being there. I realize how blessed it is to live on this side of Christmas, to be a post-Christmas believer. I am not referring to a “getting through the holidays” and making it to January perspective but, rather, to being a New Testament Christian rather than an Old Testament believer. I pause and wonder how Moses, Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Ruth, Naomi, and countless others followed so faithfully without the benefit of the knowledge of an incarnate Messiah.

Thank you, Jesus, for already being here. Let us rejoice and live a life full of the faith that can come as a post-Christmas Christian. God's gift to us is real. He is here, and he is the greatest gift to share with everyone. May they know we are Christians by this love.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. This year I will continue to check that Jesus is still there. More than ever, I need Jesus to be coming—to be here. I am praying with fervor for his presence to be as real and as earth awakening as it was at the first Christmas. May there be peace on earth!

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for always being there. We are thankful that we can live joyfully in the knowledge of an incarnate Messiah. May that joy spread to those around us this season. Come quickly, Lord. We wait eagerly for your return.

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