

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Last week, we began a new lectionary year that focuses on the gospel of Mark. Last week, we also had a much better preacher, Bishop Curry. And Bishop called our attention to Jesus's words in Mark's gospel to "keep alert" and "keep awake" (Mark 13:37). Keep awake and be ready. Keep alert and look for the time. Then, today, we jumped back to the beginning of Jesus's ministry. To the very first verse of Mark. To "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1).

"Good news." It's a phrase that Mark's readers would have known and heard. It might be similar to "Make America Great Again" or "Build Back Better." You see, "good news" comes from the Greek word **εὐαγγέλιον** (*euangelion*). This Greek word is also where we get the word "gospel." And **εὐαγγέλιον** (*euangelion*) is also used by the Roman empire to describe that agenda of *Pax Romana*. Quick pause. Has anyone heard of this term before? (Yes, no, maybe-anything in the chat will do.) Ok, well, either way, *Pax Romana* roughly translates from Latin into English as "Roman peace." It describes about 200 years of relative peace and stability for the Roman empire that began around 27 BCE. And, in the Roman world, *euangelion* referred to the good news of the peace brought by the emperor. Peace that led many to believe that the emperor was a god. Peace that turned into the worship of the emperor. Ok, that's a nice little history lesson, but why does this matter?

Well, the first words of Mark's gospel are clear that the peace being described is NOT of the emperor's peace, and Mark is NOT the Roman empire's peace. In fact, Mark is going to *contrast* the *Pax Romana* with the peace of Christ. Mark is going to reveal to us the *beginning* of the good news—not the complete revelation, but the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, the first readers of the text would know how Roman peace began. You see, after the end of the Roman Republic came the Roman Empire, and it was the Roman Empire that ushered in supposed peace. Roman Peace was built on law, order, and security. Roman Peace was brought about by the emperor having complete control and extreme authority over the governors, lawmakers, patrons, and magistrates. At this point, Rome was no longer a constitutional republic, but rather, it functioned as an autocracy. Now, Roman Peace was *not* the absence of war, but rather it was the situation in which all of Rome's opponents were beaten down and had lost the ability to resist.¹ This was the context in which Jesus found himself—that is, in an occupied territory after the expansion and domination of the Roman empire. So too, Roman Peace was achieved on the backs of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Roman Peace was achieved through military might, by taking what Rome needed, and by taxing to build up the empire. Roman Peace was achieved through fear, through political loyalty, and through brutal humiliation. This was the emperor's "good news."

And, frankly, we see these same things today in the American Empire. We see political parties driven by loyalty. We see a long history of military expansion starting with the slaughter of First Nations and moving across the globe.² We watch politicians use fear to control the masses. We watch as the economy and our daily lives are built upon the "essential work" of the working poor and the marginalized. And we participate in these systems as we work to get our holiday gifts at the cheapest price, while being unaware or ignoring the trickledown impact on the poor. We allow the land, air, and water to be destroyed for silly trinkets and fleeting feelings of superficial connection. We support political systems that are steeped in loyalty and cultivated by fear. We keep the status quo in this area or that area because, ultimately, many of us benefit from these systems. You see, the *Pax Romana*, it serves us well.

¹ <https://people.exeter.ac.uk/jda208/The%20Peace%20of%20the%20Ara%20Pacis.pdf>

² <https://www.globalpolicy.org/us-military-expansion-and-intervention.html>

But Mark shows us the good news of Jesus Christ. Good news that harkens back to the prophets. Good news that might not feel like good news to those who find comfort in *Pax Romana*. Rather, the good news seen in Mark is God's good news shown throughout the scriptures. It's found in today's reading from Isaiah, where the author, while in exile, yearns to be back in Jerusalem. And from that social location, Isaiah consoles God's people. Isaiah reminds the people that the inequality will be leveled. That, those held high will be brought low, and those low will be lifted up. That, the places where trouble is found will become peaceful, and the difficulty of a winding road will be resolved. It's a vision from Isaiah that sets the stage for how we see John the Baptist and ultimately, how we see Jesus in Mark's gospel.

For, God brings a way that, albeit difficult, is good, right, and just. And, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we too can embody what it means to live in Christ's peace. For Christ's peace feels like dying to the rich and the privileged. Christ's peace looks like rejecting violence and pride. Christ's peace prioritizes acts of service and love. It's peace found by losing some TV time to, instead, write a letter to a detained immigrant as we slowly work to lift up the deep valley. It's peace found through giving our financial gifts to the church and our ministry partners so that we might bring the mountain down to a more equitable level for all. It's peace found in advocating for the straightening of bureaucratic systems that unnecessarily drag out help for the hurting. It's peace found in comforting the terrified as they flee persecution, as they mourn loss, and as they suffer.

Friends, I'm going to leave us here. For, this Advent season, we are given an opportunity to help prepare the way for Christ's permanent and pervasive peace. We have been reminded to keep awake and to keep alert. To look for opportunities to turn away from the worldly and Roman style of peace, and to turn towards Christ's peace. And each time we gather here, we pass Christ's peace, not as an intermission or a time to chat, but rather as a way to begin our participation in Christ's peace. It is a time when

republicans, democrats, and independents level the ground. When poor, rich, and middle class smooth over the surface of injustice. Where male, female, intersex, and trans- folks gather to acknowledge Christ's peace that shows no partiality. And with this seemingly insignificant act, we train our muscles to practice what we preach. We begin God's hard work to level the mountain of racism and nationalism, to straighten the road of privilege and partisanship, and to repair the broken road so that we might prepare the way for Christ's peace. That is the message of this Advent season—to join God in preparing the way for Christ's never-ending reign of love. A love freely given to you, to me, and to all of creation. Friends, truly, *this* is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.