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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2016, Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20
On the Shoulders of a Child

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this evening's sermon, I call it, "On the Shoulders of a Child." This title is inspired by this evening's First Lesson, the reading from Isaiah Chapter 9. I believe that this Isaiah reading is one of the most lovely passages in the Bible. It goes this way:

For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given:
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God,
The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6, KJV)

Did you catch the reference to "the shoulder of a child"? "...and the government," Isaiah says, "shall be upon his shoulder." For now, the government rests on other shoulders. But that is only by way of temporary permission. The true government of reality rests on the shoulders of the Prince of Peace, and all present rulers should bear that in mind and be great lovers of peace.

I remember the slender shoulders of our sons, Sam and David, when they were children. Nowadays, when they are grown men, it would be hard for me to hold them in my arms, because they are tall and broad-shouldered, all legs and arms, and would sprawl all over the place. But I remember when they were just little guys – how they fit so well into the arms of Carol and me, and how little their bones were and narrow their shoulders.

On that first Christmas, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem's stable, he was like other children – just a little fellow, with the fragile physique and frail shoulders of a baby. He was just a wee branch, just a shoot rising up from the root of Jesse. But on *his* shoulders is placed the government which shall be our joy and our salvation. Jesus shall reign, the King of kings, Lord of lords, and everlasting Prince of Peace. And so we are happy at Christmastime.

The world knew *a kind* of peace back in the days of Caesar Augustus, back in the days when Jesus was born. It was a peace called the "pax Romanum." One Bible commentator describes this fierce peace of the Roman Empire thus: It was "the kind of brutally enforced social quietude often found under

tyranny.”¹ It is the peace of armor and swords, spears and crosses, intimidation and broken hearts. But it is not the peace sung of at Christmastime by the multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and saying:

¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14, KJV)

That Roman peace was not the Gloria we sing in our Sunday liturgy:

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. (LBW, Gloria)

That Roman peace was not the perfect peace spoken of by the prophets. It bore little resemblance, for example, to the “showers of blessing” spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel. Through that prophet, the LORD promises this:

²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. ²⁶And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land... (Ezekiel 34:25-27, RSV)

I love that idea of safely “sleeping in the woods,” since there will be no danger from the beasts in the land. My wife, Carol, and I are all excited because we have recently signed up for a vacation to Alaska, next summer. I am so very eager to see an Alaskan grizzly bear or the mighty Alaskan brown bear. But the way things are in this age, I would not want to sleep in the woods near a grizzly bear! But Christmas means that there is a day coming when the wolf shall dwell in peace with the lamb, and the bear with the cow, and there shall be no more hurt, nor sorrow in the world (Isaiah 11:7). The Prince of Peace we celebrate this evening shall see to it.

And it is not just that he will calm the fierceness of the wild beasts. He will also calm the fierceness of the human heart. That is going to be the great thing. One day, for example, the bus will stop and the Prince of Peace will get on. He will take charge of things on that bus. He will stop any fussin’ and fightin’ on the bus and will teach the strong young man sitting in the front seat, for example, to give up his seat to the elderly person or the pregnant

¹ Jeffrey, David Lyle. Luke (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible) (p. 37). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

lady standing nearby. And the young man will be glad to be taught. Yielding his seat to the elderly person will bring some more peace to this heart.

The Prince of Peace will stroll into the office of arguing administrators, and will lead them into figuring things out, so that the shelter for the poor will have adequate and safe heat in the wintertime.

The Prince of Peace will come upon gangsters planning their next heist, and he will convince them that they are meant for better things in this world. And gangsters who might not have known innocence and peace for a long, long time, will learn the ways of peace again.

Isaiah says that the nations will no more learn the ways of war:

...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4, KJV)

Important things go on, I am sure, in the war colleges of the nations. For now. But there is going to come a time when the Prince of Peace will transform military generals and military scholars into artists and blacksmiths who can beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks. Amen!

Some of us, my friends... some of us at certain stages in our lives, have troubled hearts. Things are contrary. We are not enjoying a season of peace. But better times are coming because the Prince of Peace is going to so surround people with good friends and neighbors and loved ones, that the heart shall sing for joy. Many of us do not really need gold and silver. What we really need is to love and to be loved and to have some peace in our hearts. The Christ Child is going to see to this, for he is the Prince of Peace. The government rests upon his shoulders.

Sorry to say, the Prince of Peace himself did not get to enjoy much peace during his own thirty-some years. When he was but an infant, his family had to flee into Egypt because of the murderous plans of King Herod. So, the Prince of Peace knew what it was like to be a refugee. In time, the wood of the manger will become the wood of the cross, but no matter to this Prince of Peace. He is willing that it should be so. For him, peace is not some abstract idea. Rather, peace is something that was denied him, as it is too often denied us. He knew opposition. Indeed, he knew opposition so powerful that in the end it killed him. So, when we praise the Babe of Bethlehem as the Prince of Peace, we are praising Someone who deeply knows that peace is a good thing. Peace is a needful thing. We need it in our land, we need it among our people, we need it in our families, and we need it in our hearts.

The government of all the universe is truly and rightfully laid upon the slender shoulders of the Christ Child, and this is good, for he is the Prince of Peace, and we are his people. Seek peace wherever you can nowadays.

Practice peace wherever possible. Try to teach peace to your children and to others. And look forward with joy to that coming world of peace gathered around the Christ Child of Bethlehem, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.