

# The Rock Eternal

Isaiah 26:1-4; 1 Peter 5:6-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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November 10, 2024/Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Peace Sunday)

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The Sunday of Remembrance Day weekend is the day that many Mennonite churches around the world choose to celebrate Peace Sunday.

We are convinced that peace is an important part of who we are and how we understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For many, it may even be the most important part.

C. Arnold Snyder was a professor of history at Conrad Grebel University. In 2013 he wrote an article on the origins of our Anabaptist peace witness for *Vision* magazine. In it, he remarked that in his experience,

[P]eace—in its biblical, theological, ethical, and practical aspects—has come to occupy the center of Mennonite conversation and identity as no other denominational conviction has.<sup>1</sup>

This rings true to my observation and experience, as well. Mennonites love to talk about peace. We have strong convictions about peace. And we believe that this is the time of the year when the world needs our witness.

In my observation and experience, many Mennonites also feel a bit conflicted each year around Remembrance Day.

Yes, we are a historic “peace church.” No, we don’t want to participate in glorifying or romanticizing war. Yes, our ancestors were often (although not always) among the

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<sup>1</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, “Anabaptist origins of Mennonite commitment to peace” in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, vol. 14, No. 2 (Winnipeg: CMU, 2013), 17.

conscientious objectors to war because of their commitment to Jesus' teachings on nonviolence and yes, this costly and faithful witness ought to be honoured and celebrated.

At the same time, we are grateful for the freedoms we enjoy, and we recognize that these freedoms have been purchased at a high price. We don't in any way want to minimize the importance of remembering those who have lost their lives in war.

We want to join our neighbours in in honouring sacrifice, in lamenting, in feeling sorrow for a world where war is and has always been so prevalent.

I've spoken before about how this conflictedness has felt very personal for me over the last half-decade or so since my son joined the Canadian Armed Forces. I don't know how many Mennonite pastors have soldiers for sons, but I'm guessing I'm part of a fairly exclusive club.

So, we seek to be people of God's peace in a world that is complicated and messy. A world where things don't always fit the way they're supposed to. A world where things spill out of the tidy theological categories we might prefer.

I love this banner that Annie designed because I think it portrays this reality beautifully. We work for, long for, pray for peace in a broken world.

We don't always get it right. But we try to make something beautiful and faithful out of the fragments and shards, the jagged edges and the bent tin of our world and of our lives.

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Aside from the tensions we might feel around what our "position" ought to be on war and peace and what the gospel of Christ demands of us, there is a tension that is even closer to home.

I think it's really easy to make peace an abstract "position" that we hold about far away realities while ignoring the more important task of being people of peace close to home.

It is relatively easy to talk about Israel and Gaza and the Ukraine and all kinds of other geopolitical realities, to protest and write articles and advocate, to congratulate ourselves on being a "peace church," to embrace a "progressive social ethic" and all the while ignore or neglect the peace that God has called us to in the relationships closest to us.

Having a “position” on peace is a lot easier than being a peacemaker.

And so, on Peace Sunday, I wonder if God might say to us, “I’m less interested in your geopolitics than I am in your character, your attitudes, your relationships. That’s where I want to see peace flourish.”

“I want your marriages and families and schools and workplaces and churches to be more peaceful places because you are in them.

“I want you to assume the best in your neighbours rather than the worst. I want you to refuse the easy paths of polarizing discourse about those who don’t think like you (timely words after the US election).

I want you to be agents of *shalom* right where I’ve placed you. I want peace to be *a way of being* that you are practicing, daily, in imitation *of* and love *for* my Son.”

In the article I quoted earlier, Snyder reminds us that for the early Anabaptists, peace wasn’t a “position.” It wasn’t what marked out their brand as unique in the denominational spectrum. It wasn’t the motivation for political or social activism.

It was a personal expression of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

A favourite text for early Anabaptists was John 15:5:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

It was only this “remaining in Christ” that allowed the early Anabaptists to refuse violence. For them, peace was personal, and it was a direct expression of Christian discipleship.

I cannot prove this, but I suspect that early Anabaptists would have been puzzled by many Mennonites transference of the focus of peace on to geopolitics. They would have *assumed* that war was the way of the kingdoms of men, but that their task was simply to embody a different kingdom in obedience to a different king.

They would have pointed to the fact that Jesus spent no time whatsoever lobbying the Roman Empire to embrace his teaching and practices. His teachings about violence were relentlessly personal, communal, local.

Peace was not an agenda for modern nation states. It was a path for individuals, families, churches and communities.

And lest we're tempted to romanticize our Anabaptist forbears, they didn't live it out perfectly either!

Snyder points out that it didn't take long before Mennonites' beliefs *about* peace to stand in stark contrast to their actual *practice* of peace.

Gradually, peace became detached from "the spiritual underpinning of connection to the living vine." Strident legalism began to emerge. And of course, Snyder is not the first to observe that often Mennonite churches were characterized by a stark "absence of peace among the churches and the members themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Mennonites may have always been hesitant to take up the literal sword on behalf of the ruling powers; but we have often been quite willing to take up the metaphorical sword in response to perceived moral transgressions or ideological impurity within their families and communities.

Jesus calls us to peace on the ground and close to home.

Anyone can have strong opinions about Gaza or Ukraine. It's far harder to deal with person across the pew whose politics you don't like.

Anyone can be antiwar. It's far harder to be a person of peace in your marriage, in your relationships with your kids.

Anyone can have a theological "peace position." It's far harder to cultivate peace as an inner attitude in our workplaces and homes, around kitchen tables, in our online engagement, in everyday life when people irritate us and are insensitive to our needs or seem deliberately difficult.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20.

The world needs peace. This is absolutely true. A world full of refugees and famine and economic exploitation and injustice and violence is in *desperate need* of the peace of Christ.

We do well to work and to pray for peace around the world. We will do so later in the service.

But peace starts much closer to home. It starts within.

According to Snyder, the first Anabaptists understood peace to be spiritual fruit of abiding in Christ. He is the vine; we are the branches.

**Peace should *not* occupy the center of Mennonite understanding and identity. Jesus should. We are people of peace because we follow Jesus not people who like Jesus because we're pro-peace.**

We will *never* be people of true peace unless we are sinking our roots deep into Christ's love.

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In our reading from Isaiah today, we heard these words:

You will keep in perfect peace  
those whose minds are steadfast,  
because they trust in you.

Some may have grown up with the well-loved King James Version here:

<sup>3</sup>Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.

This is perhaps a different way of expressing the truth of the vine and the branches metaphor that Jesus used.

Peace—"perfect peace"—is the fruit of abiding, of dwelling, of training our minds, of fixing our gaze on the person of Jesus Christ.

For the last couple of years since I've been a chaplain at the jail, I often think of a bit of a funny story when it comes to this idea of "dwelling" or "abiding" with Christ.

The inmates are required to sign in for the chapels. Name, unit number, time of day. Records must be kept. And so, every week I send a clipboard with a little pencil around the circle.

For a while, one guy always had a massive grin on his face as he wrote his name. I'll call him Adam.

I knew why Adam was smiling. He had a standard practice. He would write his name and his number, as per the requirements. But then he always left a few blank lines before writing another: "Jesus." Some days, he would expand a bit. "Jesus of Nazareth."

I always smiled along with Adam when I saw the attendance sheet come back. I interpreted it as more than a cheeky little gesture; I saw it as expressing a profound truth.

It was a way of inviting Jesus to be present with us. To, on some level, "stay our minds" upon him, even if only for one hour. To invite his peace to take up residence in our circle and in our lives.

This is something we need to do every day. Maybe it's beginning your day with prayer. Maybe it's lighting a candle and pondering a story from the gospels. Maybe it's just a simple declaration: today, I will trust you.

Keeping company with Jesus—inviting him into the room, fixing our gaze upon his love, his mercy, his truth, his peace, is the path to being people of peace.

In our second reading from 1 Peter, we heard an invitation to humility and to trust.

<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Is anyone feeling anxious this week?

(You didn't follow my advice about staying away from TVs and phones, did you? I didn't either, sadly!)

Anyone looking out at the political landscape and feeling a bit bewildered or uneasy or angry or sad or cautiously optimistic. Or just tired of it all?

Meghan Larissa Good is an author and a pastor from Arizona. Some of you have read her books. She wrote what I thought was a very good post-election blog post where she shared “four forgotten truths” which many Christians overlook as they agonize over the American political landscape this week.

I won’t read all four. But one stood out to me.

**God’s kingdom generally advances from the margins rather than from power-centers.**

I hear Christians say things like this all the time. But our emotional responses reveal how much we struggle to believe it. Our emotions rise and fall with the status of worldly power. Something within us cannot help believing that God’s kingdom must be winning or losing based on our personal assessment of what is occurring on the largest possible stages. We might say that God works in out-of-the-way places on the edges of the world, but if we’re honest, we prefer only to *rely* on such places as the last possible resort.

The truth is, Caesar’s wars and Herod’s edicts often have very little to do with the core project God is working. The headlines are about Rome and Jerusalem while God is starting a new world in Bethlehem and Capernaum. Our imaginations have been hijacked by false stories about where the kingdom’s center of action lies. It takes deliberate effort to start to challenge and deconstruct our own idolatries of power. The indicators of the actual state of God’s kingdom are always best read under open skies far away from the spotlight.<sup>3</sup>

Wise words. I would say that our emotional responses to the election also reveal how much we struggle to trust.

We may say all the right things about how God is in control, about how God is working in all things to bring about what is good, about how swords will one day be beaten into plowshares and the lion will lay down with the lamb, but deep down on some level we still suspect that we are responsible for engineering God’s future of peace.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://meghanlarissagood.com/2024/11/09/four-forgotten-truths/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=four-forgotten-truths](https://meghanlarissagood.com/2024/11/09/four-forgotten-truths/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=four-forgotten-truths)

Do we trust that God is indeed Lord over this conflicted, chaotic and polarized world? That God is the Rock Eternal that Isaiah speaks of? That God can and will fashion something beautiful out of all the broken pieces and jagged edges of our world?

You will keep in perfect peace  
those whose minds are steadfast,  
because they trust in you.

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I want to close with a well-known prayer. It is a prayer that is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.  
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.  
Where there is discord, let me bring union.  
Where there is error, let me bring truth.  
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.  
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.  
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.  
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Master, let me not seek as much  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love,  
for it is in giving that one receives,  
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,  
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,  
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

Three words stood out to me in this prayer.

**ME:** Make *me* an instrument of your peace. Not my nation or any other collective of which I am a part. Jesus' call to peace is directed to me, personally. It is not something I can demand from others on Jesus' behalf. Christ's summons is personal.



**INSTRUMENT:** Peace is practical. It's not a set of principles or doctrines that we keep at arm's length. It's for everyday situations where we need to forgive and love and extend mercy and trust.

**YOUR:** *Your* peace. God's peace. Not my peace or your peace, because we reduce peace to less than it should be. We need God's peace, *shalom*. The absence of violence and conflict, yes, but also the *presence* of all that contributes to human flourishing and the flourishing of all that God has made.

Lord Jesus, make each one of us instruments of your peace.

Help us to cast our anxieties upon you, to anchor our trust in you, our Prince of Peace, our Rock Eternal.

Amen.

