

Advent is set apart from Cultural Christmas – while not as shiny and bright as what we will see around us during the season, the Season of Advent helps us understand more deeply the reasons why a Savior would need to be born into human existence. It is odd to folks that the first few Sundays of Advent begin with readings from the Hebrew Scriptures – usually something from the prophets. Generally these texts will point towards attributes of the One whom God would send to turn the world from desolation to joy. We start this way to help mark the slow process that salvation takes; when it will first be realized by a few that hope is enfleshed in a baby born of parents from a backwater village called Nazareth. As the child “increased in wisdom and in years” (Lk2:52), Jesus would eventually be seen to bear the hope for the reign of peace for Jerusalem, and beyond, of which today’s texts speak. But, we aren’t there yet. We are only at the beginning of the journey.

{show Advent candles}

The themes of the readings are reflected in the illuminance of **the candles on the chancel table**. In the brightness of our sanctuary we lose the effect. You need to use your eyes to help you imagine what this space would be like were it in darkness and only one candle was providing light.

In many respects, that one candle is a good representation of what the world into which Jesus, the unexpected Christ, was born. It was occupied by a foreign power whose might was shown through legions of soldiers armed with the latest technologies of intimidation. (There is a very good reason why the First Nations Bible dubs the Romans, “People of Iron.” This translation is an apt

glimpse into the mindset of the Indigenous People who preceded the European settlers; that they would understand a people group who used superior weaponry to kill and subdue others by violent means.) History has a way of repeating itself, particularly the tendency for foreign powers to do what they can to take what they want. Currently we see that in the ongoing violence being waged against Ukraine – recently, Russian President Vladimir “Putin told reporters in Kyrgyzstan that Russia will continue to attack Ukraine ‘until the last Ukrainian dies’ in order to gain control of Ukraine’s industrial east.” (Heather Cox Richardson, [Letters from an American, 11/28/2025](#))

It may seem a bit off to kick-off the season leading to Christmas in this manner. But, my friends, it is from a place of privilege that we come to think of Christmas with images of yulelogs, carols, and silent nights staring at twinkling lights on a tree. We must imagine what shape Advent is taking for Ukrainian Orthodox Christians. Closer to home, many of our neighbors near and far are being profiled by their own government (our government) for nothing other than fitting a stereotype conjured up by an administration seeking gain for its own nefarious reasons. What form is Advent taking for Christians being targeted by ICE? These may feel like “political” questions, but the deep desire for the Savior of All is born from a world suffering from unjust conditions. The psalmist doesn’t beseech their readers to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” because it is a nice sentiment. The psalmist is praying for a city with a beleaguered history of being besieged by those seeking power from both outside and inside its walls.

It is interesting that each of these readings from the lectionary have Jerusalem as its subject. Some of you probably already know this, but I was reminded when

doing a word study of “Jerusalem,” how its syllables break down. The first syllable, yārâ (yah-rah), means “to throw, cast, to project” and by extension “to point out, show, direct, teach, instruct.” ([Blue Letter Bible](#))

The second syllable should be a bit more familiar to your ears: šālam (shah-lam’), which means “to be in a covenant of peace, be at peace” or “to be complete, be sound.” ([Blue Letter Bible](#)) It is the root of the word “shalom” which “implies a state of completeness, wholeness, and well-being – that goes beyond the absence of conflict. It can also mean peace, prosperity, health, safety, and harmony in all aspects of life—personal, spiritual, and communal.” ([Google AI](#)) Going back to the First Nations Bible, they translate the name “Jerusalem” as “Village of Peace.” This has always struck me as ironic because it is a town, or city, that seems to have known nothing but a lack of peace – a place that has always known conflict. As Jesus proclaims in Matthew 23:

37 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you, desolate.

And yet, what we get from this word study is that the intention of “Jeru-salem” is that it is to be the locus of the peace of God that is cast forth into the rest of the world. The called-for hope is that it will be the exemplar of wholeness and well-being.

So the author of Psalm 122 offers these words,

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

7 Peace be within your walls

and security within your towers.”

8 For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.”

If *shalom* can settle into Jerusalem, then it has a chance to infect the world; as the prophet Isaiah writes, “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction / and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” (Is 2:3c) But, peace is not to be found there ... yet. The prophet begins what Barb read with the words, “In days to come...” The prophet is speaking into a desired future, when iron will no longer be used to subdue, but will instead be used to plow the ground, making room for the abundance of sustenance; that former tools of war will be used to prune produce-bearing plants for the wellbeing of the community. The prophet imagines what the world could be when instead of focusing on division and destruction, we place our energies toward “teach(ing God’s) ways, (so) that we may walk in (God’s) paths.” (Is 2:3b) It is casting a vision towards the “not yet.”

The biblical record holds that it is “Jerusalem” that will be the place from which God’s *shalom* will be cast, infusing the world with wholeness and well-being. And yet, **wherever those are who seek to “teach God’s ways and walk in God’s paths,” there is the place where real, lasting good can begin; including right here, right now.**

Advent gives us time for perspective – time to grow into the ways of peace. As the psalmist concludes with the words, “I will seek your good,” we can use this time during Advent to focus on the myriad ways we can work towards peace in our own spheres of influence.

It is easy to be distracted by the bright lights and decorated stores and “fa la las.” However, let us use this season to look around us and identify where those places are where the light is dimmest. And one by one, let us light a candle for the shalom of the world. Let us live into the words of Christian contemplative Howard Thurman wrote the poem called “I Will Light Candles This Christmas.”

I will light Candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.

(From *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*)

Come, my Advent companions, let us walk, in the light of the Lord!