

Peace Amid the Chaos

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

~ Romans 15:13 (NIV)

I had an appointment in Cherry Hill. The Interstate 295 traffic was backed up, with some cars weaving in and out to get ahead (I am told these cars are called “skaters.” Why is everyone so impatient?) With tractor trailers crowding me on both sides, I felt like a hamburger in a bun.

I finally got there, and later I went home a back way, which, due to a major detour, took me past the mall area. Since I was going past the mall anyway, I thought it would be a good idea to stop at a store near the mall.

When I went in, the music played so loudly that the sales clerk couldn’t even hear a question I asked. The same thing happened at the next place. Whew. Crazy traffic. Loud music. Exhausting.

So I headed over to Hobby Lobby. I walked in, heard soft music playing, and spent a long time there, unwinding. I hummed along with the hymns and praise songs and just basked in the peace of a store with kind workers and a lack of hecticness.

During the Christmas season, our days can be like driving on 295 with the speeding, skating cars or trying to think in the loud, noisy stores. Our To Do list might be screaming at us to get moving and get things done. People around us may be scurrying and busy.

When you recognize you are going under, it might be a good time to pretend you are in Hobby Lobby with soft music playing — or in any other place where you find a sense of calmness. Hum or sing hymns and praise songs. Pray no matter where you are. Bask in the peace found in Jesus Himself. Remove yourself from it all for a few minutes to refresh yourself. Maybe it’s trite to remind you that Jesus is the reason for the season, but when I recite that mantra, a calmness wraps around me and all else fades away.

Lord, let me feel the peace of the season that only comes through looking at you, the gift, not at all the outside wrappings.

Claudia Cuddy
Evangelical United Methodist Church

Playing Well with Others

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid. ~ *John 14:27 (CEB)*

This past Christmas was the year of Lego® in our household — not just for our children, but for me as well! I didn't grow up playing Lego (or is it “playing with Legos”?), but that changed this past summer. While on vacation, our two sons received Lego sets and asked me to help build them. I quickly discovered how cathartic and peaceful the process was. It gave me a chance to connect with my children, to be fully present, and to slow down.

The word *Lego* is an abbreviation of the two Danish words *leg godt*, meaning “play well.” That's something our world could use more of, isn't it? Too often, we struggle to play well with others. How do we do that? I believe it starts with making peace — peace in ourselves, and with others.

In Hebrew, the word for peace is *shalom* — meaning not just the absence of conflict, but a state of wholeness and completion. Think of a Lego set. When every piece is in place, it is whole, complete — it is in a state of shalom. It is bringing together and mending that which has been broken.

The kind of peace that makes us complete and whole only comes from God. Jesus says He gives us peace, not as the world gives, to which we say “Thank God.” For us to play well with one another we need to allow God to do a work in us, to transform us and make us whole. The One who mends the brokenness of this world and makes us whole gives us a charge to be peacemakers and to love one another. So may we *Lego*, play well with others, by being peacemakers who live in, through, and by God's grace.

May the peace of God that exceeds all understanding keep our hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus to make us complete and made whole in love.

God of peace, continue to do a work in us — in our world, mending what is broken, bringing hope, restoration, recovery, and renewal, and to send us out as people of your shalom.

Pastor Tim Conaway
First United Methodist Church of Glassboro

The True Christmas Message

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. ~ *Luke 2:11 (KJV)*

Christmas. This year I've had enough of the blatant commercialism that seems to bombard us. I'm tired of hearing about how many shortages of gifts we'll have to deal with and how expensive everything will be. I don't want to hear about how we will need to decorate extra early so we can get our money's worth out of a Christmas tree.

Who are all these media types telling me how and when and what I'm supposed to be doing to celebrate Christmas? They've missed the point of the whole holiday. Christmas is not about gifts and trees and decorations. Or even about family get-togethers and holiday traditions. It transcends carols and Christmas trees and holly and silver bells. The truth is — I believe we've all lost the real meaning of Christmas.

Consider this. The God who created the universe, in all of its vastness and complexities, fills to overflowing the very universe He created with His own being. And in the midst of those swirling galaxies lies a blue and green dot that moves within the whole. This magnificent God was so filled with love for the human beings He created on this blue and green dot — our Earth — that He longed with all His being to have a full relationship with each and every one of them.

So He became, for a time, smaller than the dot. He entered the realm of humility and darkness to become a light and a life shining to all. This magnificent Lord has reached out to us by becoming a mere baby in a manger. He knows us. He understands us. He is one with us. He loves us. He has come to set us eternally free and to give us eternal life!

That's the message of Christmas. And if you strip away every gift, every decoration, every tradition, every carol, every tree, wreath, and bough of holly, we are simply left with this: Jesus came because He loves us so very much and He wants us to know Him and love Him forever.

So the question is: This Christmas, can we get past all the “stuff” and focus on what it's really all about? Can we take the time to reach out and tell someone that there really are “glad tidings of great joy for all the people”? Our simple Christmas message — powerful, vast, and magnificent — can be heralded: “Joy to the world! The Lord has come!”

Lord, help us share your Christmas message of joy and love.

Gilda Picioccio
Lititz United Methodist Church

God Will Supply Our Needs

And my God will meet all of your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ~ *Philippians 4:19 (NIV)*

Several years ago, these were the words of a worship song. I sang it in church and privately. I felt better because I was singing one of God's promises. I was confident that I would get what I needed from God. I was looking for God to do things inconsistent with His plan. I treated Him as a benevolent father who doled out Christmas presents rather than the universe's Creator.

I was in God's Word and claiming His promises, but things were not going my way. There were things I could depend on in life: heartache, struggle, and loss. I was blessed to have our pastor discuss the how-tos of Bible study. He reminded us that reading God's Word is essential, and we should not just pull out a verse to suit our feelings or needs. That stung me. I had been doing just that and being disappointed at the results. A new pattern emerged. I found myself in prayer and God's Word with each challenge, not just looking at the little bites but what whole sections were teaching.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul thanks the church for its generous support. He says he has learned to be content in all circumstances. Paul is talking about walking through the storms of life. His experience teaches us how to draw on a life lived with the Savior regardless of the circumstances.

In confidence, he closes by saying that God will supply all our *needs* according to His riches in glory but not all our *wants*, even the good ones. We may experience pain, discomfort, and loss, but Jesus will go through it with us, providing what we need in the moment and in eternal life.

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to be in plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength. ~ Philippians 4:12-13 (NIV)

Kayt Marra
Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Poinsettias

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth.

~ Psalm 96:9 (KJV)

Worship in church at Christmas is a special time for me. The church seems to take on extra beauty. The sanctuary is always beautifully decorated, but what I find the most striking are the red poinsettias. I like to arrive early and simply sit and enjoy this quiet beauty.

The poinsettia is also known as the Christmas flower. It originated in Mexico and derives its name from Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first United States Minister to Mexico. He brought the flower to the United States in 1825.

The colored parts of the plant are called bracts, which are special leaves. We mistake them for the flower petals because of their bright color, which is usually red. They need a lot of darkness to change color — but also, a lot of light. Hence, long nights of darkness, followed by long sunny days.

The plants have become tradition and were linked to Christmas in the 16th century. A legend tells of a poor girl named Pepita or Maria, who had no gift for the birthday celebration of Jesus. An angel told her to gather weeds and place them in front of the church altar. Red leaves grew from the weeds and thus became poinsettias.

The Franciscan friars in Mexico used poinsettias in their Christmas celebrations. They saw the star shape of the leaves as representing the Star of Bethlehem, as well as the color representing the blood sacrifice of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. The Aztecs used them to make red dye, as well as a medicine to reduce fever.

We can see correlations with the light of Jesus and the darkness we are in while in sin or before accepting Jesus as our Savior. The color red stands for the blood of Jesus given for us. The leaves grow in a star shape, which reminds us of the star that pointed to Jesus. We could actually see the star shape in the leaves when we received a beautiful poinsettia from my brother-in-law and sister-in-law at Christmas.

Dear Lord, help us to simply worship and enjoy the quiet beauty of the season.

Lacy Haynicz

Evangelical United Methodist Church

Note: Information was sourced from “Poinsettia Facts for Kids,” *Kiddie Encyclopedia*. Do not laugh, sometimes simple minds need simple explanations.

Bloom Where You Are Planted

This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." ~ *Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NLT)*

God is our Creator. We are His creation. We are blessed to be here — wherever we are located and/or experiencing life. But all too often because of our circumstances, situations, life happenings (curve balls), trials, and tribulations, it is too easy to forget and get focused on believing life is bigger than our Creator.

This has been the most trying year ever! A year of big transitions. I am thankful to God and believe He is with me through it all, but (and there it is — everything behind the *but* is what counts) I have had to keep reminding myself that God is my Creator and I am His creation! He knows what He has planned for me. All who know me know I "kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:5 KJV) because I am stubborn at times.

In this transition, I have had to go ahead of my husband to South Carolina. We are moving here for ministry and to be closer to our grandchildren. In the interim I am staying with one of our daughters, while providing child care for the other daughter. I am currently "displaced." I am learning to *be* at home while not truly *having* a home in South Carolina. I am learning to bloom where I am temporarily planted — prayerfully, humbly, gratefully, and generously — while relying on God in complete faith and hope, knowing His plan is good and will work for our family. As a result, my prayer life is ever increasing.

I am not by any means saying I have been exiled as the Israelites had been, but we all experience moments of transition in life that are like exile because they are time-outs from our ordinary. Today let us reflect on our lives, that we may thankfully and prayerfully seek our Creator for His approval of our blooming from His planting.

Father God, we come boldly before this day praying to you for welfare and well-being of our home, our neighborhood, our town, our county, our state, and our nation and all the people and the governing officials. May we serve you completely, blooming as you would have us, where we are planted.

Pastor Kellie Heisler
Florence, South Carolina

What Is Time?

There is a right time for everything: ~ *Ecclesiastes 3:1 (TLB)*

Seconds, minutes, hours, days. Sometimes time passes swiftly and silently — times when life is in a steady routine or I am having a good time. During these times, I never really give time a thought. I don't look at the clock and say "Wow, I've been enjoying this for X number of minutes/hours."

Other times life seems to never get past the minute I am in — waiting for the call from the doctor (with test results, appointment, a plan). Each second feels like an hour. Has the hand on the clock even moved? "We'll call you by the end of the day." It comes and goes so slowly.

Time. You can:

- Waste it
- Spend it
- Tell it
- Pass it
- Bide it
- Have it
- Make use of it
- Have free
- Never have enough of it
- Have too much of it on your hands
- Be on it

Time. It can:

- Be of the essence
- Be a friend
- Be an enemy

Every second, minute, hour, and day is a gift from God. Our time on earth is limited, but God gives us exactly the right amount of it. All the time that God grants to us here on earth is all the time that we need to accomplish what He has planned for us to do. So, no matter how fast or slow time seems to be moving, we know that God is in control and we can trust Him.

Father, you are outside of time, yet you created time for us, knowing our needs. Thank you for being with us every second, minute, hour, day, and beyond.

Denise Molino
Bethlehem Lutheran Church