caught, not taught
and he shall be called

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 6 For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

4 Always be joyful because you belong to the Lord. I will say it again. Be joyful! 5 Let everyone know how gentle you are. The Lord is coming soon. 6 Don’t worry about anything. No matter what happens, tell God about everything. Ask and pray, and give thanks to Him. 7 Then God’s peace will watch over your hearts and your minds. He will do this because you belong to Christ Jesus. God’s peace can never be completely understood. 8 Finally, my brothers and sisters, always think about what is true. Think about what is noble, right and pure. Think about what is lovely and worthy of respect. If anything is excellent or worthy of praise, think about those kinds of things. 9 Do what you have learned or received or heard from me. Follow my example. The God who gives peace will be with you. 10 At last you are concerned about me again. That makes me very happy. We belong to the Lord. I know that you were concerned. But you had no chance to show it. 11 I’m not saying this because I need anything. I have learned to be content no matter what happens to me. 12 I know what it’s like not to have what I need. I also know what it’s like to have more than I need. I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. 13 I can do all this by the power of Christ. He gives me strength.

Philippians 4:4-13

Jesus, we ask that through the power of Your word You would help us experience the kind of peace and strength and hope that only You can bring through Your word. We ask this in Your name, Lord. Amen.

Well, good to have those of you in the Community Center with us, those of you at home watching online. Thank you all for being here.

Certainly, one of the words you hear a lot at Christmas time is peace. Peace on earth, good will to all. The Scripture we just read calls Jesus the Prince of Peace. But if there is any one word from Scripture that cannot be adequately translated into English, it is that word peace. Or, in Hebrew, shalom. Which means so much more than just peace.
In fact, I think peace in general is kind of a problematic word. Personally, it’s not a word that is always attractive to me, because it sounds so peaceful. Which sounds like it could be boring sometimes. It makes me think of lying in the sun in Hawaii on the beach by the ocean. Which does sound awesome. Let’s just think about that for a minute. But the problem is, I can only do that for so long before I need to do something active and energetic like go get a Mai Tai, or something like that.

The other problem with the word peace is we think of it as the absence of stress or conflict. Having everything just perfect. A while back I was in a coffee shop and there was a woman in line who said to the barista, “Is that latte going to be 160 degrees? Because I need it to be 158 degrees.” Like, seriously? 2 degrees? And that’s an interesting use of the word, need. And then she went on and she said, “And I want a shot of vanilla, but not a whole shot, just a half of a shot. And I want it to be half soy, and half regular.” She went on with about four other requests. My wife said, “We need another recession.” Like, serious. That would take care of that real quick.

You know what really annoyed me about that woman, though? How much like her I often am. Not about lattes, but other stuff. Like Christmas. You guys know I love Christmas, and I always want it to be perfect. So every year I put up a ton of lights. My wife says I let off a Christmas bomb. I bake cookies. I take my daughters to the Nutcracker. I build fires in the fireplace. I make hot chocolate. Are you not noticing a word that keeps getting repeated? “I” do all of that. In order that we have a beautiful, wonderful, peace-filled Christmas, right? And I do all of that work ... My wife always says to the kids, “Kids, if something happens to Daddy, no more Christmas.”

The problem is, it can kind of bring stress to me. Last weekend I was trying to prepare a sermon and get the lights up and all of that stuff. One of my kids asked me a question, and I just felt irritated. Like, “Leave me alone. I’m getting Christmas ready so we can have fun.”

But Biblically speaking, peace is not having everything exactly 158 degrees perfect. That’s not peace. For one thing, as soon as we get what we want, we just want something else. It’s an endless cycle. And peace, right now, is a very resonant word for us, isn’t it? In our own individual lives, we want peace in a stressful life. But oh, my goodness, our world. You see the shootings, and it’s just so discouraging, and frightening, and you wonder, “Where is peace in the middle of these tragedies?”

Two weeks ago I was in the West Bank with another pastor from Seattle to see what peacemaking looks like in that volatile conflict. We were in the homes of Muslim Palestinians, in the homes of Christian Palestinians. We had Sabbath dinner in the home of a rabbi with his family. We met with officials from the UN and the US Consulate, and Israel. We experienced that conflict from all sides. Peace was a word that was on my mind, “What does peace look like here?”

But to really have peace, really peace, because peace is found in the person of Jesus, nowhere else. And to really have peace, I think we need to understand from a Biblical perspective, what does that word really mean, Biblically? Today’s text uses the word shalom twice, lamely translated as peace, but it means so much more than just the absence of conflict or stress. It means total economic, relational, emotional, and spiritual flourishing.

And the text gives a list, by no means exhaustive, of some of the things that Biblical shalom entails. It’s so much more than peace. So, for instance, the word shalom means a presence of justice. This text predicts Jesus’ birth 500 years before it happens, and it says, “He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom with justice and righteousness.” And justice is a politicized word, these days, but it simply means that...
everybody gets treated the way God wants people treated. God bless everyone, no exceptions. That’s justice. It means the poor get helped climbing out of poverty. It means we help victims of oppression.

I saw the need for justice on both sides in the West Bank. I know that some of you are really strong supporters of Israel, others of you supporters of Palestinian rights, so I’m going to do my best to be even-handed, so as to maintain shalom in the congregation. I saw the need for justice everywhere.

One of the places we visited was a prison. We watched several hours of military trials of Palestinian kids. One was only 12 years old, in prison for throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers, which is classified as a terrorist act. He’d been held for several weeks, already, without trial. The hearing was all in Hebrew, which neither the kid nor his family spoke. There was a translator there, but out of a 20-minute hearing, he translated only about 5 minutes of it, leaving the family completely in the dark. The result was, the trial got yet again postponed. So this 12-year-old kid has to stay in prison even longer for throwing a rock.

I’m a supporter of Israel, but I was getting kind of mad, until our translator leaned over and said, “See, the judge? The Israeli judge? And the prosecutor? They are Russian Jews who grew up in the Soviet Union where Jews were oppressed, and fled to Israel hoping to find safety.” And I realized, “Oh, my goodness. So they experienced injustice themselves, which has made them afraid, which is why they are clamping down so hard on the Palestinians.” We had several Israelis say, “Look, for 3000 years, people have been trying to kill Jews. And in our own country, only a little bit bigger than King County, we have endured multiple terrorist attacks. We have got to clamp down in order to be safe.” And I realized, “Oh, my goodness. On both sides, we’ve got people experiencing cycles of injustice and fear, and it’s not leading to peace.” Where there’s no justice, there can be no peace.

Now, I did see signs of hope, which I’m going to get to in a little bit. But shalom entails justice. Which in the long run is just self-interest. Because when there is justice for everyone, there is peace for everyone.

I heard Palestinians and Israelis both say, “Our long-term security is in learning how to be friends, rather than being afraid of each other.” Which is true. If you think about it, how many of you live in daily fear of Canadians? No, right? Because they’re our friends. Shalom means justice.

Second thing Biblical shalom means is right relatedness. The word the text uses is righteousness, but that kind of conjures up images of self-righteous and all of that. Biblically, righteousness simply means being rightly related to God, to our environment, and to each other. Which can be really hard to do. And we’re well aware of that, often, in the holiday season. Just a quick poll here, how many of you have family gatherings during the holiday season that are completely free of irritation and tension?

What? Okay, like, there’s one person. Wow. The rest of you. We need help, man. On Thanksgiving day I got a text from someone in our church that said, “I remember you once preached on reconciliation, and you outlined 5 steps of a good apology. Could you text those to me today?” Thanksgiving dinner going that well, is it? Shalom means right relatedness.

The third thing shalom means is the presence of Jesus. In a similar passage to the one we read today, the prophet Micah predicts the coming of Jesus centuries before He was born. He says, “But you, O Bethlehem … Though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel … And He will be our peace.” (Micah 5:2, 5)
Peace is not a something. Peace is not something that we can manufacture. Peace is ultimately found in a someone, in the person of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus. Shalom is the presence of justice, right relatedness, the presence of Jesus. And finally, shalom is participatory. Whatever God gives to us is always meant to be given away to others. And when we act as agents of shalom, and seek to bring wholeness, and justice, and right relatedness, and restoration, and healing in our schools, our offices, our neighborhoods, it brings us a sense of fulfillment and shalom as well.

I heard a pastor from Boulder, Colorado, talk about the floods that happened there a couple of years ago. During the storms the roof of his church started to drip. So he went in and put a bucket under the drip in one place. Then he saw another place that was dripping, so put another bucket there. Did that two or three times. Went home. Couldn’t sleep because he was worried about the drips in his church.

And then Jesus just kind of nudged him. He thought, “Man, here I am worrying about the drip, drip, drip in my church Sanctuary, but my whole community is flooded.” And for him, that was sort of a metaphor for our lives. We’re often so focused on the drip, drip, drip in our own lives, that we miss that there’s this bigger world out there in need of shalom. Then he realized that he had a lot of talented people in his church who could not only fix the drip in their sanctuary, but could also get out and help people in their community.

So he got them together, they went out, they helped people repair their homes. They helped schools reopen. They helped businesses reopen. And, oh, along the way, fixed the drip in their Sanctuary. He said it felt so good to be positive and focused on a solution rather than obsessing over the negative. Peace isn’t found in fixing the drip, drip, drip in our lives. It is found when we seek shalom: the flourishing of others.

Which means real Biblical peace, shalom, is not passive at all. It’s active. It’s energetic. Shalom may not be comfortable, but it will be comforting. Shalom may be courage to do something that is hard. It may be a renewed sense of purpose in the middle of difficult circumstances. It may be a sense of God moving in the room.

One of, if not the most significant experience of shalom I have ever had in my life came when I was deciding whether or not to come here. Some of you have heard me tell this story in various places, others haven’t. But after the search committee offered me the job, I asked for three days to pray about it. On the last day, we were living in California, I went to the beach. It was October. It was 80 degrees in October. I’m thinking, “Why is this even a decision?” I prayed all day, got nothing. No sense of God’s presence, no thoughts that weren’t my thoughts. Nothing.

So I called the chair of the search committee, and I said, “You know, I think I oversold myself in the interview. Did any of my references mention I don’t have a clue what I’m doing?” And he said, “Yes. We’ve been informed of your many incompetencies.” Not quite the right words, but that was the gist. Then he said, “Don’t make me fly down there to get you.” I’m like, “Whoa.” That scared me.

So we got done, I hung up. And finally it was time to go, and as I was walking to my car, I was not thinking about God at all, actually. I was trying to remember where I’d parked my car, and suddenly, out of the blue, I got this idea of the first sermon series I would preach if I were to come here. It clicked into place, downloaded instantly into my brain, all the sermons, in like a second. And the best way I can describe it, it was like the tumblers of the lock clicking into place, and it opened. I realized I was supposed to come here. And I said out loud, “Oh, crap.”
Or something very similar. It was one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life. And yet, it was strangely comforting. There was a sense of the rightness of it. And a courage that was not coming from me. And a sense of God moving. It was not passive, it was exhilarating. It felt good, and hard, and scary, and difficult, and bad, and sad, and whole, and holy. Shalom.

Fast-forward a few years later, in Rwanda, with a team from this church assessing the viability of the Center for Champions, which we built through the Ripple Effect campaign to help underprivileged Rwandan youth. But this was before the campaign. We were at a rally for street kids, and in front of me was a row of 8-year-old girls, cute as a button. And the translator told me they all had to work as prostitutes just to survive. And my heart broke. But in that moment I heard God say, “You are pastor of a church filled with people who care. Go home and tell them, and they will respond!” So I went over to the photographer that we had with us, and I said, “I need you to take as many pictures as you can. We’ve got a million dollars to raise.”

It was not comfortable, but it was strangely comforting. It was shalom bringing wholeness and restoration of what had been broken. Justice for those who didn’t have it. And I’ve had many moments of shalom since. Peace on earth is not some passive absence of conflict, it is the active presence of justice, right relatedness, healing. It’s not about having the perfect job, perfect house, perfect Christmas, it’s the presence of healing and wholeness and Jesus moving in our lives.

So how can we step into a little more shalom this busy, stressed-out holiday season? Because, ironically, when we celebrate the Prince of Peace is kind of the least peaceful season of the year. Right? The Apostle Paul puts it this way: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, Rejoice! [You know where he writes that from, don’t you? Prison. See, that’s shalom, when you can say that in prison.] Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, ... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, ... whatever is lovely—think about these things, ... and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4-8)

Three things, how to experience shalom, and they all begin with the letter T. Thinking, thanking, and trusting. Think. Paul says, “Whatever is true, right, lovely, think on these.” The Greek verb means to dwell on, to obsess over, what is good. You know, most advice on how to handle stress talks about kind of ridding our minds of negative thoughts. That has never worked for me. I don’t know about you, but I find it very difficult to not think about something. Plus, that just feels to me like a way of denying reality.

When my brother and his wife had their third child they were amazed at how well she slept through the night. Their room was in the basement, but they had a baby monitor. For the first few nights, they kept saying, “Wow, this kid is just so quiet.” But then, on the third or fourth night, they noticed that the baby monitor had one of these visual meters on it, and the thing was way up in the red zone. The volume was turned off. Kid was actually screaming. That is not peace. The Biblical peace is not this ignoring, being deaf to, reality. They did go and comfort her, by the way. That’s not shalom, though. Just like being deaf to reality. Biblical peace, real peace, is not the absence of negative thoughts, it’s the presence of, the dwelling on, noble, good, worthy, lovely things that help us rise above the problems.

Which brings me to the second T, and that is, thanking. I heard someone recently who, whenever something good happens to him, he writes it down on a piece of paper, and he puts it in a shoebox. Then, at the end of the year, around Christmas time, he looks at all those little pieces of paper, each with something good that had happened to him that year, stuff that he had forgotten all about, and he reads through them all. He says it always lifts his spirit. Thanksgiving brings shalom.
Thinking, thanking, and then, finally, trusting. Paul says with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. That is, he thanks before he even gets what he has asked for. How can he do that? Because he’s trusting that God will give him something good, or use bad things for good, but it will always lead to good, even if it’s not what he asked for.

Pastor Tim Kelleher tells a story of when he was single, there was this one woman he really, really wanted to marry. The problem was, she wouldn’t even go out on a date with him. So he would ask God, “Make her date me, make her date me.” At one point, she got a job at a resort, so he got a job at the exact same resort. He’s like, “God, I’m making it easy for you. Come on.” He is so glad that God did not answer that prayer the way he wanted, because the woman he eventually married was a far better partner for him. For one thing, when he wanted to marry this other woman, he didn’t know he was going to be a pastor. She would have hated that. Trusting God means that we trust that when we ask for something, He will always give us what we would have asked for if we knew as much as He did. And when you trust that, you have shalom. See, if you want the peace that passes understanding, sometimes you have to give up trying to understand. And sometimes, not getting what we want is actually a better way to peace.

A while back I saw an article on real things that have been said to Whole Foods cashiers, that have been collected. Things like, one person said to a cashier, “What am I going to do? You are out of Spanish goat cheese and the dog won’t eat anything else!” Oh, my. Another woman says, “What do you mean you’re out of vegan parfaits? Are you going to go to the car and tell my daughter you’re out of vegan parfaits?” Or, my favorite, “I hate that you guys ask me to donate to charities at the check-out counter. I mean, if I’d wanted a guilt trip, I would have gone shopping with my mother.” No shalom there.

That is so indicative of our culture, isn’t it? Peace is having everything I want when I want it. That’s not peace. Because even if you get what you want when you want it, then you always want something else. No matter how hard we try to make everything 100% perfect, something’s always not quite 100% perfect. Someone’s always out of Spanish goat cheese. Jesus said to His disciples, “Peace I leave you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” (John 14:27) Jesus gives a different kind of peace, a more durable kind of peace.

So this week, rather than trying to pray stuff out of your life, “Jesus, take away this problem. Jesus, take away this fear.” Why don’t you pray stuff into your life that crowds out all the negative stuff? “Jesus, bring right relatedness. Jesus, bring justice in, through, and around me. Jesus, make me an instrument of Your peace to others.” Because when we are peace makers, we experience shalom, wholeness, ourselves.

One of the most hopeful things I saw in the West Bank was when we met with the founder of a non-profit called EcoPeace. He said, “You know what? Trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem? That’s just too huge, too big. So we focus on a concrete, specific problem, namely the Jordan River, which is vital to Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians alike.” But it is so heavily used that 96% of what used to flow through the Jordan no longer flows through the Jordan. In fact, in many places, it looks like this. The mighty Jordan River is just a polluted ditch in a whole lot of places. And of course, the Israelis blame the Palestinians, the Palestinians the Israelis. Blah blah blah.

So this non-profit brings together Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian mayors, up and down the river, to solve the problem. But if they just brought them together, of course, all they would do is fight and blame the other person. So first, before they meet together, the mayors of all these towns, along with people from their town, are given a list of things that are hazardous to water. They have to go through their community and find all the things in their community that are hazardous to the Jordan River. And they do that first,
before they all meet together, so that when they all meet together, each mayor realizes his town is part of the problem. So the finger-pointing stops, and they start to work on solutions.

This group takes a faith-based approach. One of the things they’ve done is prepared a workbook for Jews, and Christians, and Muslims, talking about the sacred meaning of the Jordan River in all three religions. So, for instance, the Christian one talks about all the hymns that mention the Jordan, and all the Bible verses, and all of that, to show that this is a spiritual issue as well. They aren’t talking about peace, just trying to fix the Jordan River, but in the process they begin to understand that people on the other side aren’t so different. They have the same hopes, same fears, same issues. The vast majority of Palestinians are not terrorists. The vast majority of Israelis do not want to be occupiers and oppressors. They are all just trying to raise their families and get along.

All of that created a grass roots movement that put pressure on local governments to fix the Jordan, which in turn created national pressures to do that in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine. So, they’ve built sewage treatment systems. They manage water differently. So now, for the first time in 49 years, fresh water is flowing out of the Sea of Galilee, down the Jordan River into the Dead Sea.

In the Middle East, water is power. So the thinking is, “I’m going to deny my enemy access.” But they are realizing that they are mutually dependent, and what they do affects everyone. So they drafted a covenant that was signed by rabbis, pastors, and imams, and the chief Mufti of Jerusalem, for the first time in history, shook hands with an Israeli rabbi.

Now, they’re working on a new project. Because Israel has more water than it could ever use, because they are the world’s leader both in desalinization and in recycling used water. They are awash in water. But Jordan and Palestine are bone dry. However, desalinization that Israel does takes a lot of energy, which they don’t have, but Jordan has all these vast stretches of hot, sunny desert. So the proposal is to put solar panels all over the Jordanian desert to make electricity that would then be shipped to Israel to desalinate the water, that would then be shipped back to Jordan and Palestine. Creating healthy dependencies where there are unhealthy dependencies today.

Brilliant. Making a difference, actually making inroads to peace. However, not without a cost. The founders of this nonprofit have had death threats from all sides, because all sides view them as traitors. European countries have stopped funding them because they work with Israelis. Other groups won’t fund them because they work with Palestinians. Blessed are the peacemakers, right?

Yet the founder of this non-profit just bubbled over with enthusiasm and joy and energy. He talked faster than I talk. Like, I’m serious. I’m like, “Whoa, you’re talking really fast. I can’t keep up. This is how my congregation feels.” Because he had all this energy, and he was filled with something that is in very short supply in the Middle East these days—hope. Because he’s seeing it actually work. He’s seeing people actually begin to start to care about each other who were formerly enemies. I left our conversation thinking, “Peace in the Middle East? Easy peasy.” Because he just made it sound so possible, so doable, so hopeful. In spite of the death threats, in spite of funding being cut off, he had an infectious spirit of hope and joy. He had shalom. Not a passive absence of conflict, but actively bringing justice, restoration, right relatedness, shalom. In fact, he said, “The only thing we build is relationships, and it’s leading to peace at a grass roots level.” Jesus can bring peace.

Now I’m not saying that you have to go start an NGO this week to have peace. I’m not saying that. Maybe for you it’s just making a list of what you’re thankful for. Or maybe it’s to bring some peace into a toxic work
environment. Maybe you just remain calm during a tense meeting, or you affirm a co-worker, even if it’s a co-worker you don’t like, and watch how that brings peace in a tense situation. Maybe it’s to seek justice in some way, like befriending the person everyone shuns. Maybe it’s to let go of some of the pressure you put on yourself, to have the perfect Christmas. Maybe it’s just to spend some time in prayer, or listening to music, or just trying to enjoy the season. Maybe it’s to say, “I’m sorry,” to someone, and heal a relationship.

Whatever it is for you, step into it. And do that with Jesus this season. Because there’s no way to have peace without walking with the Prince of Peace. And peace is not a something, it is a someone. So as you seek peace, do that, this season, with Jesus, asking Him to be your Prince of Peace, our Almighty God, Everlasting Father, the bringer of shalom.

Jesus, that is Who You are. We want to follow You. We give You our stressed out lives. We give You our anxious, worried thoughts. We give You our world, and we know that where You are at work, You bring peace, shalom, healing, and wholeness. Lord, help us to experience that supernatural peace, and give it away, so Your world looks more like You want it to look. We ask this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. Isaiah 9 describes the future Messiah. What are the characteristics of His rule?

2. What does the word justice mean in the context of Isaiah 9? What does the word righteousness mean?

3. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, describe the kind of peace He brings?

4. What do you do to relieve stress and worry? What does the Apostle Paul say to do in Philippians 4 (there’s more than one thing)?

5. Why does Paul tell us to rejoice in the Lord always. Why does he say to do that? How can we rejoice when life gets difficult?

6. How does Paul advise us to pray? Why does he say to present our requests with thanksgiving? What does he promise prayer will do?