

Good News in the Empire

PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

HOPE
PEACE
JOY
LOVE

Sunday, December 24, 2025 | Christmas Eve

“Good News in the Empire” | Luke 2:1-14; Titus 2:11-14 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

You already heard the good news of Christmas from Luke 2, probably the most familiar account of Jesus’s birth. Our next reading comes from Titus chapter 2, with both a subtle announcement of Christmas and an invitation to respond to the good news by living in new ways. Listen for God’s word.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

There are 66 books in the Christian Bible. Titus is one of the shortest and one of the least well known, but it’s a good reading for Christmas Eve for at least three reasons, and verse 11 is especially important:

“The grace of God appeared bringing salvation to all.”

1. It affirms God’s grace—God’s unconditional love for the world.

By the way, grace is a central theme of our Christian faith and a focus of the book on Christian nationalism that we’re discussing on January 18.

COVENANT BOOK TALK
led by Pastor Charlie
SUNDAY, JAN 18 @ 12:15PM
**Reclaiming the Good News:
A Conversation About Christian Nationalism**
Join us for a one-hour book discussion on
Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical America
by Ted V. Foote Jr. and P. Alex Thornburg

2. Secondly, the Titus reading encourages us to respond to God's grace by turning away from foolishness and being "self-controlled, upright, and godly" as well as being "zealous for good deeds."

Titus recognizes that the good news of God's love is meant to inspire us and change us and empower us to love our neighbors and work for the Kingdom of God, as Jesus taught.

3. A third reason this reading from Titus is good for Christmas Eve is because it echoes the gospel of Luke which tells us of good news of great joy for ALL the people.

The good news is for everyone. God's love is for everyone.

This good news arrived with the birth of Jesus in a remote village of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. The biblical account has angels and shepherds and a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.

Our manger scenes and Christmas cards typically show all these participants in the drama, but rarely do we hear or see the first person mentioned in the story: the emperor.

And the emperor looms over the story. In Luke 2:1 we read: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

The Common English Bible translation makes the purpose clear: In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists.

The text goes on to say that Joseph and his fiancée Mary went to Bethlehem, where Joseph was born. He is returning to his hometown.

At Christmas, many of us know what it's like to go back to our place of birth, back to our hometowns, our place of origin.

But Joseph didn't return for a festive holiday gathering with eggnog, jigsaw puzzles, and binge-watching Netflix with his cousins.

He returned because it was a requirement of the Empire, for taxation purposes. It was sort of a loyalty test. Into this world of Empire, Jesus was born.

Jesus wasn't simply a helpless and innocent little baby. At his birth he was acclaimed as Lord. Later he was called King. The center of his teaching became the kingdom of God.

For all these reasons and more, Jesus as a rival to the emperor, and the Kingdom of God was seen as a threat to the Empire of Caesar.

The era in which Jesus was born was later called the Pax Romana. The Roman Peace.

From what I know of the Pax Romana, it was like many other empires. Yes it was a time of relative peace and prosperity.

However the primary beneficiaries of the peace and prosperity were those in power, not those at the bottom of socio-economic ladder.

Peace can mean many things.

Peace that is defined by the emperor isn't always a peace that is good for everyone.

- In an empire where the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, there is no peace
- In an empire where the emperor has total control and wants to be idolized and worshiped, there is no peace
- In an empire where the people are afraid of their own government, there is no peace.

The peace of Jesus is very different from the peace of empire.

On the night that Jesus was born, the angels sang of peace. Jesus was called the Prince of Peace. Jesus blessed his followers, saying "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27)

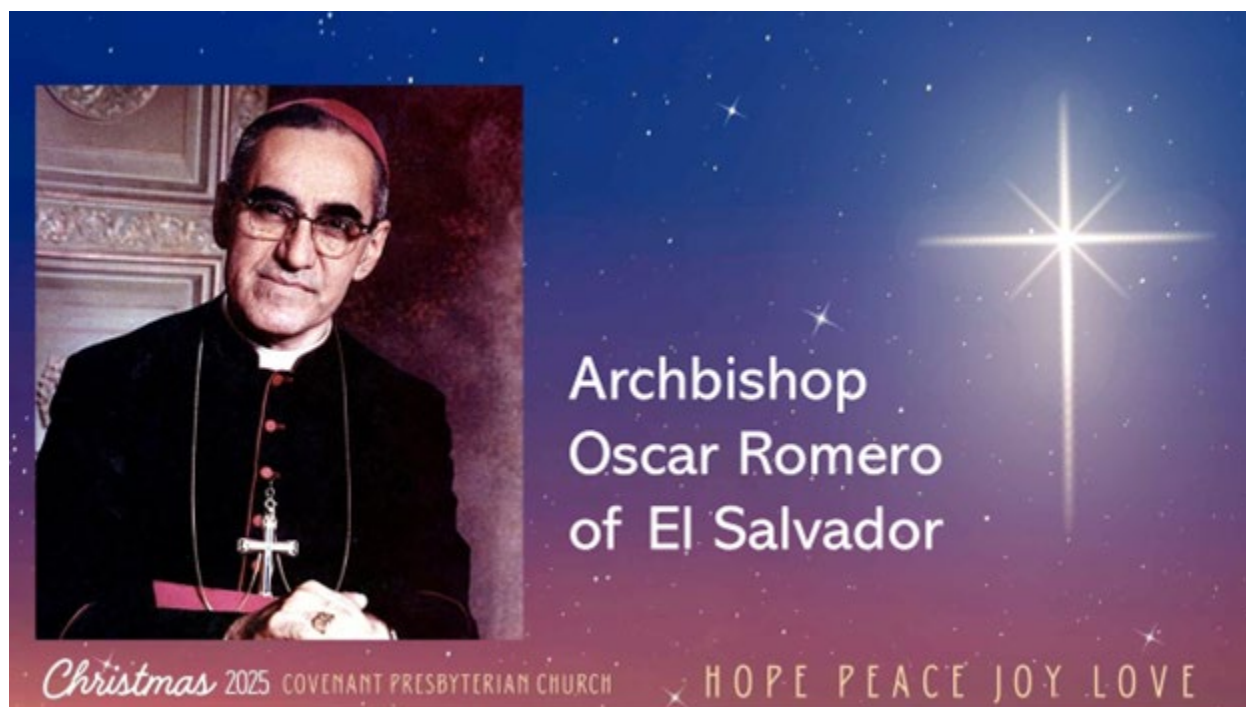
And Jesus calls his followers to the work of peace, saying "Blessed are the peacemakers." Every time we gather for worship, we pass the peace.

Peace is central to our faith. Biblically, peace means wholeness, wellness, good will for all.



I thought of this after seeing the Christmas card from my cousin, which simply says: Peace everywhere. For everyone. Always.

The peace that Jesus came to bring was good news, in contrast to the supposed peace of the empire of Rome and pretty much every empire since then.



In the 1970's, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero saw his homeland be corrupted by greedy and brutal political and military elites. Those elites spoke of peace when arresting, torturing, and killing political opponents. In response, Romero spoke of true peace:

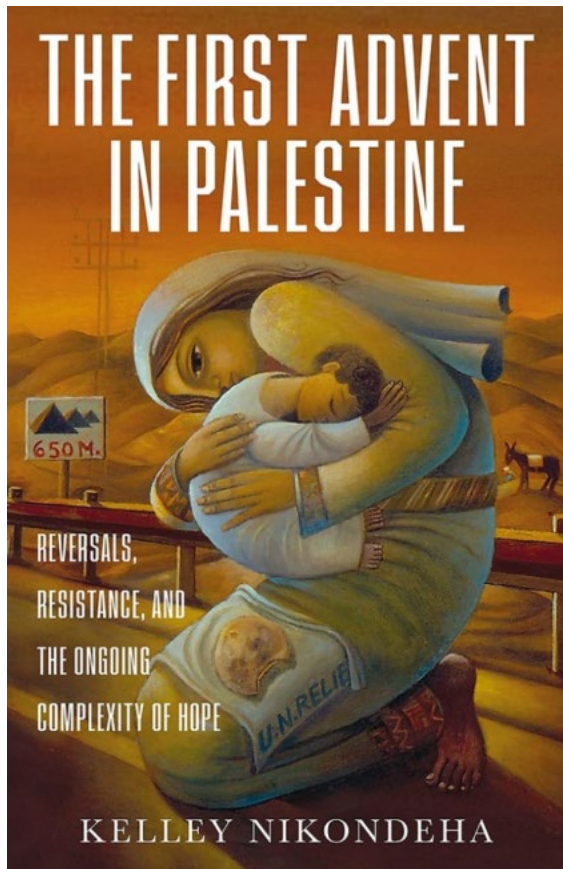
Peace is not the product of terror or fear.
Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.
Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.
Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all
to the good of all. Peace is dynamism.
Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.

So, Christmas, among other things, is an invitation to be peacemakers in the midst of Empire, in the midst of divisive politics, in the midst of family chaos.

During this season of Advent I've been pondering the words of a fascinating book called *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*.

Author Kelley Nikondeha goes through the biblical context of Jesus' birth and calls readers

to the ongoing, long-term work of peace, justice, and righteousness as followers of Jesus, in whatever empire we might find ourselves.



She focuses on the hope of Christmas, that God has come to be with us, to lead us into a new future. Near the end, she writes:

“It is this hope that energizes me as the Gospels continue...that, in the end, empires don’t stand a chance against this God.” (p. 186)

With our candles and our songs, we rejoice tonight once again in the birth of Jesus, who brings good news of hope, peace, joy, and love for everyone. Amen.

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.
That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn -
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.
When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn-a
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

— Madeleine L’Engle