

2024 12 08 – *Starry Nights: The Milky Way*

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-3

Luke 3:1-6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

- Syrian rebels advance on heavily defended city of Homs and Damascus suburbs
- Amnesty report concludes Israel's actions against Palestinians in Gaza constitute genocide
- South Korean opposition parties submit motion to impeach president over martial law order
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world>

These are just three of the headlines listed under World News yesterday on the CBC website. We are, of course, bombarded on a daily basis with news of increased tension, violence and wars around our world. Most of them seem far away, but sometimes they are personal. For instance, we are thrilled that the Syrian refugee family that we sponsor is safe here in Swift Current, but at the same time, we are aware that some of their family members remain in Syria. Last night the family was celebrating when they heard that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad had left the country. War is always personal to someone.

War was certainly personal to the prophet Malachi. He lived in a time when the people of Israel were rebuilding their temple and their lives after everything they knew had been destroyed by war. War was also personal to John the baptizer. The author of the Gospel of Luke makes it clear with his long list of Roman leaders that John lived in a time of oppressive Roman rule. A time when their so-called Pax Romana or Roman Peace was possible only because of the presence of soldiers throughout Judea, Samaria, Galilee and the rest of Israel.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent and our theme is Peace. Sometimes it seems trite to talk about peace when we live on a planet where world-wide peace hasn't been a reality for thousands of years. Some would argue that our world is more peaceful now than in the past. The United Nations would tell us that:

Globally, the absolute number of war deaths [has been declining](#) since 1946.

And yet, conflict and violence [are currently on the rise](#), with many conflicts today waged between non-state actors such as political militias, criminal, and international terrorist groups.

peace <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>

Here in Canada, we are lucky to live in a peaceful country. Most of us, especially the younger ones, have never personally known the impact of war. So what does this Sunday in Advent mean for us? What can we do about peace in our world?

As you know, our Advent Study Group this year is using a resource called "Starry Nights." Through this study we are being invited to do some stargazing, to spend time just looking at the wonder and the beauty of those tiny points of light that shine in the night sky. <https://www.saltproject.org/advent-store>

This week we focussed on our galaxy, The Milky Way. Some of us learned, for the first time, that the Milky Way is actually a disc of stars arranged in a spiral around a black hole in the centre. The reason we see a noticeable band of light stretching across the night sky is that we are located inside that disc looking out

though it. That “milkyway” that we see is light coming from an immense number of stars, sent from hundreds and thousands of light years away. An even more amazing fact is that the Milky Way is just one of trillions of galaxies in the universe, in God’s creation.

When we look at the night sky, we are not looking at something that is out there, separate from us. We are actually looking at a small section of a universe in which we are a tiny, but integral, part. We are looking from within, not from without

Black Elk, a Lakota warrior, leader and author described our relationship with peace and the universe in this way. He said:

The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Taka (the Great Spirit), and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.

<https://www.sacredstream.org/the-wisdom-of-black-elk/>

Black Elk had a personal connection to war and violence. He was a second cousin of the war leader Crazy Horse and fought with him in the Battle of Little Bighorn. He survived the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. And Black Elk lived to become a leader of his people and a spiritual guide for all people. He lived in a time when the skies were clear of light pollution and the Milky Way was

displayed prominently in the night sky. He recognized the deep connection that we have with the universe, with all of God's creation.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Elk

The first peace is that peace which comes within the souls of people when we realize our connection to the Great Spirit, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Centre of the Universe. I believe the prophets in today's readings, both Malachi and John, were also talking about that first peace. They both recognized the importance of each of us doing our own personal work, our own repentance, our own turning to God and, using different metaphors, they described the work that needs to be done.

Malachi said that when we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Mystery, then it will be like a smelter's fire, a launderer's soap. We will be refined like gold and silver, all those parts of us that keep us from knowing God's love, all those parts of us that lead us away from God's righteousness, all those parts of us that keep us from a deep relationship with God will be removed and we will know the first peace, the peace of the soul.

John described this process by saying that we need to "clear a straight path." We need to fill the valleys and level the hills. We need to make twisted paths straight and the rough road smooth. Again, all those parts of us, all the pain, all the anger, all the hate, all the fear, the pride, the greed, all of these things will be excavated away. When we repent, when we turn to God when we open

ourselves to the healing powers of the Holy Mystery, then we will know the first peace, the peace of the soul and we will be ready for what is to come.

Black Elk went on to say,

This is the real peace, and the others are but reflections of this. The second peace is that which is made between two individuals, and the third is that which is made between two nations. But above all you should understand that there can never be peace between nations until there is known that true peace, which, as I have often said, is within the souls of men. <https://www.sacredstream.org/the-wisdom-of-black-elk/>

Yes, the headlines in the news are often stories of violence and war. Yes, we live on a planet that is not familiar with peace. But it is possible for us, as individuals, to achieve a sense of peace within ourselves, if only for a moment at a time. This first peace is possible when we recognize that we are not alone. This first peace is possible when we are aware of our relationship to the entire universe. This first peace is possible when we know at the deepest level of our being that the Milky Way is not some beautiful band of light in the distance, but is rather the light that is within each one of us.

May it be so. Amen.