

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Holy God, in this final week of Advent, our anticipation is truly manifest. As children of the Living God, we desire the coming of the Lord Jesus once again in our world and in our hearts. We welcome the peace of Christ, which transcends all our understanding and inclination, recognizing it is what the world truly lacks. It is the fullness we need when we define peace as absence. Holy Christ, we seek your peace today as we come into these walls of worship. We pray that we may not settle for less than the full measure of what your peace requires. We pray to be peacemakers as your peace has affected us. May we be peace among our neighbors nearby who long for some kind of peace in their lives. May we be peace to our neighbors far away, who long for any sign of God to be among them. Holy God, may we once again find your peace within ourselves, as we cast our burdens and joys upon your mighty shoulders. Hear our prayer.

Gracious God, we often judge based on the world's standards. We want the biggest, we want the greatest, for these are the tokens of value. Nevertheless, through Mary, through the Christ, through the story of Christmas, you teach us a new message: size matters not. You work as you work; you work where and when it is the best for the greatest change to take place. Help us, Holy One, not to judge based on size but based on your values, for your peace requires not human strength but true strength of heart and spirit. We pray for peace in the name of the one who truly provides it, Jesus the Christ, who taught us all to pray in the hope, joy, and love of Christ's peace, praying as one...

SERMON

This is the weekend of Star Wars, a big weekend because the newest movie, after ten years, was released Thursday night called "The Force Awakens." You may have heard

something about it...the last few months. I saw it Friday, and it was an incredible ride. I might be going back in the near future. But let's look at a past installment. In the fifth Star Wars movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, we meet this guy, Yoda, the great Jedi Master, who teaches the young and rough Luke Skywalker. Luke is sent by his old mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, to learn from Yoda the ways of the Jedi. Luke goes as ordered to the planet Dagobah, where Yoda lives in hiding from the Evil Empire. There, Luke finds a swamp planet, not much worth looking at, and immediately crosses paths with little jolly alien. This alien, more curious than helpful, seems so awestruck by all Luke's technology, and his meddling quickly gets on Luke's nerves. This alien becomes awestruck when Luke says he is there to find the Jedi Master Yoda. He knows exactly who Yoda is, so he directs Luke to his house on the assurance he will take Luke to the great Jedi Master Yoda at once. After Luke has a fit with so many delays, impatient because he has not yet seen Yoda, the little alien goes from jolly to grim. "I cannot teach him; the boy has no patience." Luke stares at his company with new eyes. He thought this little alien was nothing more than a nuisance; turns out that he was much more than meets the eye. This little alien was Yoda all along, testing this young boy to see if he has the mettle to become a Jedi. He failed that test, but there were many more to come which he would learn better.

The young Luke Skywalker did not expect this small, aged green alien to be the great and powerful Yoda, Jedi Master of all Jedi Masters. Eventually, Luke doubts the power of this little Jedi Master, and Yoda knows it. "Size matters not," says Yoda. "Judge me by my size, do you? And where you should not. For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is." It's not his size that matters; it is the power he packs. And boy, does he pack a lot of power. With the power of the Force, he is able to move large ships at the single whim.

I love the Star Wars universe because of the wisdom it gives. With the small Jedi Master Yoda, his advice is important in that universe and in ours: "Size matters not." Appearances aren't the key to knowledge and wisdom, but we often make it that way. We judge people and things by their apparent size and how they look. The biggest things we fear, and the smallest things we dismiss by this wisdom of the world. But when we get down to it, perhaps it's really the other way around. For example, peace seems like one thing in our world, but with the power of Christ, it really is totally something else.

The other day, I saw a Christmas card that got everyone in an uproar (and with good reason). It was a family of five: husband, wife, two daughters, and a son. The Christmas card was a picture of the family, with the husband and son in the top row and the wife and daughters in the row below them. The son was holding a sign that said "Peace on Earth," and the three women in the lower row all had their mouths taped shut.

Yeah, I get it; they were trying to be funny, but it's not. It's not so funny when others say there is true peace when your mouth is shut. Even more deeply, this is how we define peace in our world today. It's the absence of something: noise, war, conflict. We define peace as a negative. But let's try this. Let's make some peace in this congregation right now. (quiet angry stare-down). Is this truly peaceful? Did you have a happy feeling on the inside? There is no peace when there is anger, conflict, and frustration beneath the surface. That's why their picture just doesn't work, despite the stab at humor. After all, do we believe that peace is the absence of something, or is it instead defined in being the fullness of something?

Peace is a nice thing to say in church, but it's hardly ever spoken of outside the walls of the church. When it is, peace is a product of power that creates the absence of conflict.

We equate power with size, and size with power. Security can easily become its own god when we try to make in by ourselves with the wrong attitudes and the wrong outlooks.

This is peace, when security is at hand. More weapons equal more power and more security, but we never see that in the story of scripture. We see a different story: the peace of Christ.

We spend time passing the Peace of Christ to one another in the beginning of worship. I believe we would all define this peace as the fullness of something: the spirit of Christ, the goodness of God? But what does it truly mean? It's not that I hope you feel good inside. It's not that I hope you have a good day. Like joy, it starts inward and must go outward. It means something transcendent and yet very present. The peace of Christ is the result of each and every thing we have talked about this Advent put together and rooted in God's mission. It begins with hope, the anticipation of God's things yet unseen but coming to be. It works with love, selfless and powerful compassion that moves in an aching world. It needs joy, the celebration of God's goodness throughout all the seasons of life. When these come together in full measure, the peace of Christ blooms. When one of these things lacks, we find ourselves out of balance, and Christ's peace is harder to find. But one way or another, the Peace that comes from Christ does not need size or strength. Like Yoda, "Size matters not." The power of this peace is beyond that of earthly peace. What it takes is a right heart, a right attitude, and goodness springs forth.

This is the power behind the Christmas story. Christmas, and all the stories leading up to it, do not buy into that old story of worldly power leading to peace. This is the story of God's power coming to be, right under the nose of the absolute Emperor Augustus of the Roman Empire and his governor Herod. It is the absolute of the Peace of Christ, and it

speaks of no conquering, no great strength of the world. It tells a different story about what power and peace look like. Mary, gives us an image of what this Godly power looks like. She speaks not of human politics but the politics of God. "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." It goes against our ways, but that is where the peace of Christ comes in. God works so that those who have none are full and those who are full are pulled down from their haughtiness. Peace here requires not silence but fullness with all God's people. Everyone has what they need, and Christ's peace reigns. It hasn't fully happened yet, but Christ's peace is always on the march.

Then there's Jesus. Anything or anyone more powerful than Jesus? But Jesus did everything backwards against our wisdom. He was not powerful. He did not create peace through human power. He was the Yoda of his age, for he falls more into the wisdom of "size matters not." What he looked like did not equate to the power he possessed. And where did he come from? Nowhere but the biblical age equivalent of the planet Dagobah: the backwater community of Bethlehem. Oh, now we sing Bethlehem's praises, but in the time of Christ, it was small. It was sheltered. It wasn't seen as relevant to the greater world scheme. This is where Micah picks up with this prophecy about the small village of Bethlehem. "O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah..." Scripture could stop there and say, "aren't really important in the grand scheme of things." Easily so; the standard of the Old Testament is the grand scheme of things, but once the prophets

come along, there is a new way: God works from the unexpected places, the unseen places, the little places, from which big, BIG change comes.

And here we have the one from Bethlehem being “the one of peace.” It’s defined here very clearly: the peace is not through military might or worldly strength; that peace and security comes from the fullness of trust and work in God. The people are fed from God’s strength, never the strength of our own hands. After all, this is the definition of “size matters not,” for all of this goodness comes from Bethlehem, little backwater Bethlehem, the city where nothing ever would happen on the world stage...except it totally does.

This is the Christmas story and the story of the Christian life. “Size matters not.” All of the ingredients of the future came together in ways that astound our logic. A young powerless girl in the eyes of the world birthed the King of the Universe. Her betrothed didn’t listen to the laws and so-called “right actions” of his world and stayed committed to a pregnant unwed mother. The Lord Christ came not as a glowing King who was too important to wear human flesh. He didn’t come with weapons and legions from which to derive security but humbly he came as a baby...a baby! If you think about it, it’s just nuts because it’s not wise. It’s foolish by the world’s ways, and yet, through a child, we come to understand honest-to-God heavenly peace.

Take time this holiday to drink in the heavenly peace. Let hope reign in your hearts, never letting cynicism take more than the moment. Be love in this holiday, the love you see lacking in the world around you. Take heart in God’s everlasting joy, for the world is looking for something happy to tide us over in the moment. When these ingredients come together, the peace of Christ will reign, for Christ’s ways will be at work. In this world, this is the best way to lose, but we know it’s the only way to win. It’s the only way to win in a

world where all we hear are the angriest voices...just check out all the political debates of today. The world needs less of its own security and more of the only security that matters, from the only one who can provide it. It's up to us to be that peace and security as the children of God.

According to Jedi Master Yoda, "Size matters not." His wisdom is true for Star Wars, and it's true for scripture, where the heroes often come from the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected forms and the most vulnerable of all society. God has a way of speaking through the small people of the world, the most insignificant of places, and that is where peace truly grows. Let us be hope, love, and joy in the course of our lives, and peace will abound when these things take root. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.