

UNLEARNING WAR

It was Thanksgiving weekend, on the day of consumer insanity known as *Black Friday*. It was the beginning of the official Christmas shopping season. Television networks had started showing “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men” movies like, *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Carol*. But the next day, the Saturday newspaper reported on the events of the Friday following Thanksgiving. The Headline read, “Christmas Shoppers Clash.”

The first line of the article read, “‘Keeping the peace,’ replaced ‘Peace on Earth’ as the holiday season’s official greeting on Friday, when spirited arguments broke out at two Tulsa stores on perhaps the most frenzied shopping day of the year.” “The Tulsa police had to stop two separate fights—one at a *Target* store and one at a *Best Buy* store.”

“What caused the mini-riots?”

“Shoppers arrived early to be one of the first people in line to enter the stores. The stores were offering special promotions to a specific number of first customers. Now, when Christians await the coming of the Prince of Peace, some of those shoppers were facing assault and battery charges over drastically reduced prices for Play Station consoles and High Definition TVs.”

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.”

Well, let me qualify that.

“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more, unless there’s a sale at Target and Best Buy.”

With a poetic promise of peace from the prophet Isaiah, we wonder if, and when, it will ever be fulfilled. The Hebrew word for “peace” is *shalom*, and it means wholeness and well-being. That’s the peace Isaiah was writing about, and that’s the divine peace God promised and we await during the Advent season.

In the book *Wishful Thinking: a Seeker’s ABC*, Frederick Buechner defines *shalom* as “having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.” Can *shalom* be experienced in the rush and frenzy of holiday shopping?

When he visited an American Mall for the first time, poet Stephen Spender said, “It’s like a zoo filled with human animals who are terribly excited about their new cage.” We’ve all been there at the zoo during the Christmas rush, haven’t we? We know all about the overcrowded parking lots, the tired and indifferent sales clerks, and waiting in line with others who grumble and complain and shove each other.

Let me ask, is it possible to find *shalom* in such a zoo-like atmosphere, with an inferior version of *Silent Night* blaring from some tinny speaker and parents snapping at their restless kids to be patient and wait their turn to sit on Santa’s lap so they can read the long list of toys they want “Old St. Nick” to bring them? Is it possible to slow down momentarily as “the shoppers rush home with their treasures,” and shove you out of the way in the process?

Perhaps it could be possible, if we only drop the sword of out-of-control-consumerism and lay down the weapon of “gimmie, gimmie, gimmie” and “mine, mine, mine” long enough to smile at the stressed out sales clerk and let him or her know they’re more than some impersonal obstacle to get through in order to finish our shopping.

Maybe *shalom* would be experienced by us, even during the spiritually toxic activity we call Christmas shopping, if we can cheerfully invite someone to move ahead of us at the cash register, even though we’ve been waiting in line for twenty minutes.

You see, God has promised us *shalom* in the coming of Jesus Christ, and God’s promise shouldn’t be inhibited by our Christmas shopping experiences. Our God is much greater than Macy’s and JC Penney and Best Buy and Target and WalMart combined, so God’s promised *shalom* is available, yes, even while we compete for stall at a department store restroom that desperately needs to be mopped and sanitized, and we enter with fear and trembling.

It’s an amazing thing, the *shalom* of God. It can come to us at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. In Oscar Hujelos’ novel *Mr. Ives’ Christmas*, the main character, Mr. Ives, is a quiet man who loves God and whose faith is dear to him, but who experiences a terrible, undeserved tragedy. His beloved son, who in seminary was studying for the priesthood, was senselessly gunned down one night near Christmas on a street not far from their home.

Mr. Ives was heartbroken, filled with grief for his son; and despite his efforts, he was filled with hatred for the killer. In the next years, he prayed to God for the grace to forgive and the strength to get on with his life as best he could without his son, but that was difficult for him. Very difficult.

One day near Christmas, he was in an office building in Manhattan, and he emerged from an elevator. A clock across the hall seemed to glow with a soft blue light. He stared at it for the longest time as the clock seemed to radiate a

soft radiance. He felt warm, embraced and at peace, as he was summoned by the vision of the softly shining clock.

He finally turned toward the elevator when the door opened. His face was aglow with a smile. He didn't even know exactly why. He began humming a Christmas carol to himself, and a woman on the elevator commented, "Well, you certainly seem to be full of the spirit of the season."

Mr. Ives never told anyone about the vision. In that visitation, none of his problems were suddenly solved. His grief was still there, and the challenges of his life were still difficult. Yet he kept that moment in his heart. He pondered it from time to time. Looking back, he remembered it as an undeniable gift of God, the gift of *shalom* that came from a clear sense that God was with him. That was the moment when the process of forgiving his son's murderer and the healing of his broken heart had begun.

At the beginning of this beautiful season—a season that has everything to do with peace, joy and giving—we still see people picking up swords and spears, as though that's the answer to the troubles of our world. Fight fire with fire. Meet brute force with even more brutal force. That is the antithesis of *shalom*. And it can only lead to death and destruction.

To experience peace as we prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace, we must love one another. We can only have peace when we realize that we have love. As Mahatma Gandhi, who led a non-violent revolt against Great Britain's oppression of India said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

But it takes more to unlearn the ways of violence and war and experience the God's promised *shalom* than simply removing our affinity for them; we must replace those things with an affinity for love. We will achieve genuine peace, true *shalom*, when we truly appreciate and genuinely follow the way of love Christ taught and lived out in his own life. There is no other way. Only then, when we love unconditionally, and love even our enemies, will we finally be able to lay down our swords and spears and Play Station consoles and high definition TVs to participate in that *shalom*.

This Advent season, let us prepare to do just that as we wait in anticipation for the coming of the Prince of Peace. Amen.