

THE HARMONIES OF PEACE

In just a few minutes the choir, along with our guest musicians, will offer up Daniel Pinkham's marvelous Christmas cantata. Pinkham lived here in New England, and was a world-renowned teacher, composer, conductor and organist. He died just last December and left behind a large body of work, much of it written for the church. He was especially known for choral works like the one we are about to hear.

At Pinkham's funeral service, held last January at King's Chapel in Boston, various speakers commented on Pinkham's sense of humor and his love of a good joke.

James David Christie, one of his oldest friends, told one of his favorites.

It seems a Norwegian Lutheran pastor went deep into the woods to reflect on the scriptures. As he was on his knees praying a huge black bear lumbered up beside him. He looked especially hungry. Nervously, the pastor prayed, "Holy God, please make this bear a Christian!" Suddenly a ray of light fell from the sky, and touched on the bear, who immediately knelt down, folded his paws, and offered a prayer himself. The pastor was greatly relieved, until he heard the bear say: "Heavenly Father, bless this meal which I am about to receive. . . ."

It's a delightful joke, but like most jokes it points to the absurd. After all, hungry bears are carnivores, not persons of faith! To say a bear might pray, is as silly as saying a lion might eat straw. Or a wolf might live with a lamb. Or a leopard would lie down with a kid. It's as farfetched as thinking there might be a day when there is peace on earth and that all of creation would live in harmony. That no one would hurt or destroy, seems a most unrealistic, even ludicrous dream!

But there it is., right there in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah. A vision, a dream, held out as a real possibility. Peace, says Isaiah, will come.

Now mind you, Isaiah doesn't write in a vacuum. His world was as troubling and as violent as our own. While they didn't have shopping malls in ancient Jerusalem, they knew all about senseless death. And though they weren't engaged in a long drawn out war, they were looking at the threat of military takeover for a great foreign power. Peace was as rare in their time as it seems to be in our own.

Still, Isaiah boldly proclaims God's dream for humanity. Isaiah boldly declares God's intention that we work for justice and promote peace: peace within and peace without.

And Isaiah even goes a step further than that. We don't have to figure it out by ourselves. The day will come, he says, when a messiah, a savior, will come who will show us how to live in peace. "The spirit of the Lord," he says, "will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord." (Isaiah 11:2)

But Jesus, the one we call Messiah, lived two thousand years ago, and centuries after the angels sang at his birth, there is very little peace on earth. But our failure to live in peace can hardly be blamed on him—much less on God!

For in and through Jesus, we do know how it can be accomplished. It is both simple and complex. For true peace comes whenever we choose to be aligned with the will of God. When we choose to follow Christ's way, when we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, then we create a bit of peace. "Let there be peace on earth," goes one of our favorite hymns, "and let it begin with me." Peace, you see, is the direct result of loving action towards the other.

Daniel Pinkham understood that. He recognized that true peace comes about when we are in tune with God. While best known as a composer, he also wrote a few poems, including this one which I share only in part:

Make me, God, your music-staff divine.

Write thereon your clef and key

Choose a gently flowing meter;

Make my life your symphony.

Harmonize me with your spirit.

Orchestrate me to your will,

And with vibrant chords celestial

All my empty measures fill.

Our world longs for peace—you and I long for peace. And we can leave it at that; we can see it as only a wistful dream. Or we can see it as a real possibility. We can become peacemakers, at home, at school, at work and in our world.

Our soprano section leader Penney Kimball had the good fortune of meeting Daniel Pinkham. At the time she was preparing some of his more difficult songs for presentation. She is, as we all know, a consummate musician, and so she was very concerned about getting the nuances of the piece, the tempos and ornamentations, the nuances of the songs, just right. So she asked Professor Pinkham about them. "What should I do at this point in the song?" she asked. "And how about here?" referring to another section.

Pinkham smiled. "Just sing it," he said.

So it is with making peace. Jesus has shown us how to do it. He has written the song. We can worry about the tempos and the ornamentations, the details and the fine points, or we can just sing it.

Jesus has written the song. It is left to us to just sing it, indeed.

Amen

John H. Danner