

New Year's Day, Feast of Mary, the Mother of God, 2015

First Reading: Numbers 6:22-27 *The Lord bless you and give you peace!*

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 67 "May God bless us in his mercy"

Second Reading: Galatians 4:4-7 *You are no longer a slave but God's son or daughter*

Gospel: Luke 2:16-21 *The shepherds found Mary & Joseph and the infant. After 8 days, he was named Jesus.*

(Complete readings may be found at the end of these homily reflections)

♪♪ Oseh shalom bim-ro-mav, hu ya aseh shalomaley nu

v'al kol y'Israel, v'im ru, im ru amein.

Ya-seh shalom, ya-seh shalom, shalom alenu v'al kol y'israel...♪♪

That's a song Mary sang - a chant used at the Sabbath on Friday night. The translation in the Synagogue prayer book is: "May the one who causes peace to reign in the high heavens make peace descend on us, on all Israel, and all the world"

But I was told by a Jewish cantor that the real meaning of the Hebrew is this: *The one who makes peace reign in the heavens, sends peace to us, to all Israel, to the whole world.*

It is more than a prayer for the coming of the Messiah, it's a prophecy of what we celebrated last Thursday, eight days ago, the birth of Jesus the Christ, the prince of peace, the one who redeems our humanity.

But what is this peace that the angels announced to the shepherds? It is the "Shalom" Mary and Jesus sang about. Shalom - which really means wholeness, healing, reconciliation, harmony, justice, communion, fulfillment of our heart's desire.

We read about Mary and the shepherds in the Gospel for today. Mary pondered the events we celebrate at Christmas, turning them over in her heart.

The shepherds imagined a new world, a world where they were valued as much as the rich and powerful. It was no accident that the Gospel story makes shepherds the first evangelists, the first ones to spread the good news of the birth of Christ. They were the poor of that society. They were often barred from the temple, and they were notorious pickpockets. Yet the angel choir spoke to them, and they came to Mary and Joseph and said, "*We understand what has happened here, and we are overjoyed.*" Then they went out and spread the news to everyone they met.

Today's feast has four different names:

1. The Feast of Mary, the Mother of God.
2. A Day of Prayer for Peace and Justice
3. The Feast of the Circumcision, eight days after the birth of Jesus
4. New Year's Day

But whether we celebrate the octave of Christmas, the feast of Mary the mother of God, or World day of prayer for Peace & justice or just plain New Year's day - Today's feast is really about a hunger, a gift, & a hope that we all share for new beginnings.

We remember our hunger for peace, we celebrate the gift of peace, we nurture the hope for peace in our hearts, in our families, in our churches, in our world. And this hope is a call to be instruments of peace.

Pope Francis in this year's message for World Day of Peace talked about how we are all required to forge a new worldwide solidarity and community capable of giving new hope to all our brothers & sisters, especially those who are victims of human trafficking; helping them to advance with courage amid the problems of our time and the new horizons which they disclose and which God places in our hands.

You know, that really is the purpose of religion. Many in our time are attracted by spirituality but put off by religion. If peace is to become a reality in our world, we need both.

Spirituality is about connecting with God and with our truest, deepest selves. Religion - the very word means to re-connect [think about the word "Ligament" which is part of the word "religion"] - is about connecting people with one another - so that peace can grow in the hearts & lives of our sisters & brothers.

Today is really about a personal gift, the gift who is a person: the one whose birth we remembered at Christmas, the one whose life we embrace through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, the one whose spirit empowers us to imagine a new world of peace, justice and reconciliation. Isaiah calls him the prince of peace, St. Paul says simply, "He is our peace." Mary gives birth to him, and then becomes his best disciple.

Today is about the consequences of Christmas.

St. Paul, in the 2nd reading, proclaims the present truth that we are all children of the same God. He calls us to embrace the present, which is a gift: to embrace our identity as sons and daughters of Abba, and our relationship with the rest of the human family, who are all daughters and sons of one heavenly Father.

As we continue to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are called to be like Mary & Joseph & the shepherds: to remember what was, to embrace what is, to imagine what will be.

I took some time this past week to look over my calendar for the year 2014. I asked myself, "What experience of Shalom, do I remember from the past year?" I think the deepest experience was of sharing faith and life with two groups: One was the friars I meet with every two months - Friars who live singly and engage in extraordinary ministries in NYC, NJ, North Korea and Saudi Arabia. We are a community without walls. The other is a group of lay men & women who meet once a month to deepen their understanding and living of the spirituality that grew out of the lives & spirit of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

What is the deepest experience of shalom you have had in this past year?

We are called to imagine a world where men & women act like the children of God that we are, and to do what we can in our own way to bring it about. We are called to imagine what a church without fear can accomplish, and to make it real by living lives of reconciliation and truth. We are called to simply live the *shalom* that is our heritage. You may not think we can do much, but each of us and all of us can do *something* to make shalom real in this new year.

You may know this song, it is the prayer I would like to end with.

You are welcome to sing it, or to hum along.

♪♪ Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.
With God as our father, we are family,
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.
With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow.
To take each moment, and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me! ♪♪

The Scriptures

1st Reading - from the book of Numbers:

The Lord said to Moses:

"Speak to Aaron and his children and tell them: This is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The Lord bless you and keep you!

The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you!

The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!

So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."
[Numbers 6:22-27]

2nd reading - from the letter of Paul to the Galatians:

Brothers and sisters,

While we were not yet of age we were like slaves subordinated to the elements of the world; but when the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted children. The proof that you are sons & daughters is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the spirit of the Christ which cries out "Abba!" ("Father") You are no longer a slave but a child of God! And the fact that you are a child of God makes you an heir, by God's design.

[Galatians 4:3-7]

Gospel reading - from the Gospel according to Luke:

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us." They went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger; once they saw, they made known the message that had been told them concerning this child. All who heard of it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

[Luke 2:16-21]