

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The weeks before Christmas can be busy. The first days of December bring us closer to more people than perhaps any other time. The stores are full, and the lines are long. Your office Christmas celebration next week puts you into the same room with people you might see only once a year. Your family gets together the week before Christmas, and this year, your cousin with the smallest house is hosting. It's going to be tight! Advent and Christmas bring us shoulder to shoulder with strangers, neighbors, family, and friends.

Is that your definition of peace? A long checkout line, a crowded party, and sharing a couch with one person too many? That's no one's picture of peace. Peace is the opposite image. Peace is open space, quiet, and calm. If only we could find it. That's our picture tonight as we continue to see how the star of peace comes to us. This evening, we will look at the two middle points of the star. These points stretch out and say, *“Peace is getting away!”* If we can get far enough away, we'll find peace. It's a natural idea, and we can spend a great deal of time pursuing it. But once again, God knows the limits of our pursuit, spares us from a disappointing chase, and gives us more than we would have found for ourselves.

Let's start with imagining that peace can be found in a place far away from where we are right now. What is your picture of that perfect place? Is it a cabin in the far north woods set on a quiet lake? You have the lake to yourself. There are no other cabins to spoil the view and no motors waking you up. The only sounds are the waves gently breaking on the shore and the geese calling one another. There's no wind or waves, just the perfect reflection of the trees on the far shore. That's peace. There are no phone calls, messages, or emails to be returned and no 24-hour cable news to remind you of the problems in the world. There is nothing but peace. Make some coffee, sit on the porch, and soak it all in.

That sounds wonderful, and if you can escape to that place and stay there, it sounds perfect. But what if you know that that's never going to happen? You can't leave your work and live in the woods. You can't leave the people who depend on you.

You need peace that fits life here and now. That's the other dimension of peace that we often seek. It's living here and now. But even here you can seek peace. That dimension of peace happens when we rearrange our past. Our past could use some change and distance. That's because the past doesn't stay in the past where it should be—silent and out of sight.

Instead, the past intrudes into our present and threatens our future. The past has those people, those events, those harsh words, and those tears that never fully went away. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could erase that past and move its dusty memory as far from us as that cabin in the far north woods? What if we could deny the darkest parts of our past and retell our story with the best parts out in front? Let the worst parts be hidden under a mumbled sentence that no one can really hear. Pick up the past and move it out of sight. Then we've found our peace.

These are wonderful ways to escape our crowded, stressful world. Take either direction and go as far as you can. Deny your dark past and escape your overcrowded present. God stops us from going in either direction and brings us peace in the present. Jesus is our peace here and now, not in our separation from one another but in Himself. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul writes, ***“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace”*** (Ephesians 2:13–15). Amid hostility and tension, Christ brings us peace.

Do you remember the disciples sailing in the boat while Jesus slept? The storm came on them, and they rowed furiously while Jesus was sleeping. Finally, they woke Him and asked, ***“Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?”*** (Mark 4:38). Jesus rose, rebuked the wind and waves, and there was calm. And He asked them, ***“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”*** (Mark 4:40).

Where is our peace? Is it on a perfectly calm lake, or is it found in the middle of a storm? The lake may be calm now, but do you remember the storms of your past? Who knows what storms might still come? So, our peace is found in the One who is with us even in the middle of the stormy lake. He who creates calm within us even when the wind and waves roar is our peace.

He is our peace by reconciling us to one another. We try to bring peace to the conflicts of our past by retelling our story. We want to distance ourselves from those people and events. But Christ brings peace by bringing together all people through His birth, life, and death. From His birth in the stable to the gathering around His cross, His coming brought together those who otherwise would remain distant. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote, *“And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”* (Ephesians 2:17–19).

Peace doesn't come when we retell our story. Peace comes at the brokenness of Jesus at the moment of His death. Peace comes when we are completely forgiven. In His peace, He gathers us from far and near, regardless of who we are. We find peace in Jesus' death and resurrection. In Christ, we don't merely come out better. We come out forgiven and at peace.

So, dream if you wish of that perfect cabin by the always-calm lake. I'm not sure that it exists anywhere like it does in our dreams. But that's all right. We don't need to escape to the lake, and we don't need to escape by a retelling of our past. In Christ alone, we find peace this Advent through Christ's words of power and His words of calm. In Him, there's forgiveness for the past and power to overcome the storms of today and the storms of tomorrow. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**