

When we enter Luke's gospel this morning, the disciples are gathered in a locked room. It's a similar scene to the one painted by John we heard last week. Gathered there in hiding, the friends are wary of every sound, every creak. Every knock on the door is met with suspicion.

Jesus suddenly appears in the midst of them. And they were shocked and afraid.

He greets them, "Peace be with you". *See that I am really here with you. See my hands and my side. See that I am whole and believe.* And to punctuate this, he eats in front of them. Hey, I get it. If nothing else gets through to them as proof of life, eating certainly does. Perhaps that is why Jesus is so often seen joining in meals with others. And yes, of course, we gather at the table with him too in the Eucharist. (That's a whole other sermon☺)

"Peace be with you." Jesus says to them.

Peace - In Hebrew it is Shalom, and in Arabic, Salaam. Did you know, the words Salaam and Islam are derived from the same root of language and meaning in Arabic? Did you know that our expression, "So long", likely came from a misunderstanding of English-speaking soldiers of the salutation "Salaam", given in the Mid-East.

In all three Abrahamic faiths "Peace" can be a simple greeting or an expression of deep care. In all three there is understanding of completeness, safety, prosperity, and concern for the welfare of individuals and communities in the care and presence of the One God. Peace, Shalom, and Salaam are strongly linked to justice, unification, and the placement of everything in its proper order; the way God means for it to be.

I have to be honest... in this present reality I found myself thinking, how do we preach peace in the midst of war and division? I think it's easy to think of peace in a naïve way. To see peace as "all we have to do is just get along with each other." Yet, one statement I read said that in the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them – just 8% of recorded history.

Even our biblical tradition shows us we humans have been in conflict since the book of Genesis. So then, where, and how are we to know peace?

I'd like to tell you a story.

There once was a king who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried to rise to the challenge. The king looked at all the pictures. And, in the end, there were only two he really liked, and he had to choose between them.

One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror for peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other picture had mountains, too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky, from which rain fell and in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all.

But when the king looked closely, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest - in perfect peace.

Which picture do you think won the prize?

The king chose the second picture, and he gave the people this reason.

"Peace," explained the king, "does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."¹

Did you know that the word "peace" appears over 400 times in the Bible? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews (13:20) refers to God as "the God of peace" because peace is the very character of God. And because we are made in God's image, God wants us to be marked by that peace. That peace is much deeper than just not having conflict. It is a peace that calls us to risk some sense of calm and seek to be a bridge toward wholeness and harmony in relationship.

Peace is God drawing near to us, and God is ever longing for us to draw close.....Close enough to see Jesus' wounds, touch his flesh and bones, and to know the risen Christ. Theologian Stephen Cooper writes. *"Resurrection life brings peace; it calms, clarifies, unites, and empowers us. Perhaps a sense of God's peace is the way we can accept the radical message of the resurrection. To insist on the reality of the resurrection is to demand that we accept our present reality as the place where transformations of ultimate reality can take place."*

We often use the phrase "peace and quiet" to refer to our own need to slow down. But peace is not merely the absence of activity or the unruliness of life. Luke writes that Jesus "opened the minds" of those with him to understand God's word. He once again woke them to the reality of the world to which they have been called in his name.

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus proclaimed blessing for "the peacemakers", he was calling out those who engaged in peace as a *creative actors*. In other words, peace must be actively made because it does not happen by chance. What if we responded to conflict in a way that is different from the way the world responds? What if we, with opened minds and woken hearts,

¹ From the book: Stories for the Heart (p. 252, Catherine Marshall)

sought to know those around us more deeply? As Paul writes, *"Let the peace of Christ kindle in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace."* (Colossians 3:15)

Walter Brueggemann asserts that *"God calls each of us to Shalom. Peace and all of its possibility is freely given and with it comes the responsibility to live into that gift. Just as with his disciples, the peace that Christ cultivates in us is a peace that arises out of, or sometimes in the absence of faith. Jesus' Shalom is an announcement that God has a vision of how the world **shall be** and is not yet."*

Jesus' peace does not keep us from trouble or fear, but it protects us from becoming overwhelmed by those forces. It is peace in the midst of life and all that comes with it. **Christ is our peace**- the peace of fellowship, the peace of friendship, the peace of forgiveness, salvation, grace, and mercy.

Here at Church of the Atonement you have experienced a lot of changes and challenges in the past 2 years. And you have drawn together to once again **be this church**, the blessed Body of Christ in this corner of Western MA. Your work is not complete, nor will it ever be. But always remember, God's Spirit is with you and challenges you to be the church in all ways and in all things. God's love is and must always be at the center of your mission here. Let that be your inspiration, your courage, your peace, and the foundation of all you seek to do and be in Christ's name.

Today, in this place, may we know the peace of the resurrected Christ, cradled in a safe nest, and blessed with a calm heart in the midst of the noise, trouble, and hard work. And may our minds be opened and awoken to the Peace of the risen Lord today and always.

AMEN

Additional references:

Bartlett, David Lyon. In *Feasting on the Word Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Vol. II. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Peace*. St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2001.