

Sermon, 6th Sunday of Easter, May 26, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

When I need reassurance, when I am having difficulty finding inner or outer peace, I turn to Scripture passages like this: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

These verses appear as one of the Scripture readings for Compline, the last office said before sleep. However, Jesus also says more challengingly, just one chapter earlier in Matthew, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” What is the peace, then, that Jesus gives us? What is its nature? What does Jesus give us that the world does not?

As you can imagine, the word ‘peace’ occurs many times throughout Scripture. I will share with you some that I love, and that I think illustrate what is meant by God’s peace, the gift that Jesus intends to leave with us once he ascends. The world may offer a kind of peace that is numbing, superficial, false, and temporary. We may feel soothed for a time, yet the world’s peace does nothing to really calm our fears. God’s peace is real, and available in the here-and-now. In a

recent conversation, a person expressed to me how walking in Nature brings her a sense of peace. Why this would be true is not easy to put into words. Perhaps it is because our inner distractions or anxieties can begin to loosen their tight grip on our psyches. We breathe more easily. The sounds and scents of spring become a different sort of distraction, one that is more healing, that is gentle, that reminds us of God's presence within and without. Perhaps we feel a new spaciousness in our inner being that helps us to know God's presence, God's peace. In the Gospel passage today, Jesus promises, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (John 14:23)

There are several places in Scripture that express the idea that God aims to lead us on peaceful, well-lit paths. In the Song of Zechariah, a canticle often said at Morning Prayer, we hear Zechariah's wonderful assurance that a savior has been raised up who will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death", and will "guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:79) This suggests that peace is not a static condition: the end of the journey. It is what helps us to persevere—no matter what. Jesus' gift of peace is not something to hoard selfishly. I remember singing in Girl Scouts:

"Peace I ask of thee, o river
Peace, peace, peace.

When I learn to live serenely
Cares will cease.

From the hills I gather courage
Visions of the days to be
Strength to lead and faith to follow
All are given unto me.

Peace I ask of thee, o river
Peace, peace, peace.”

Then there is the book of Proverbs. I love what it tells us about Wisdom,
how she is a living, breathing presence among us:

“Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding...

She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her...

Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.” (Proverbs 3:13,15,17)

How wonderful that we have a God who wants to inspire us. ‘Inspire’ literally means ‘to inhale.’ We breathe in God’s Word and it becomes the breath that gives us life. We do not have to flounder around searching for the path to peace. God leads us and guides us. With God’s peaceful pathway, what we encounter are “still waters” and the restoration of our souls. (Psalm 23:2-3)

The mighty prophet Isaiah proclaims this:

‘How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”’ (Isaiah 52:7)

These words are in one of my favorite arias from Handel’s *Messiah*. They could certainly apply to John the Baptist and to Jesus. They can also apply to us. Every Sunday we get to our feet and exchange the peace with each other. It is an affirmation that we are on the path to loving God and neighbor as best we can. This seems to be particularly affirmed in Psalm 122, a prayer for Jerusalem and those who dwell there. Perhaps we can also hear it as a prayer for us:

‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls,

and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.”’ (Psalm 122:6-8)

When Jesus offers us peace, he seems to give it as a blessing, a way of emphasizing its giftedness. More than once he confers peace on those whom he has

healed. ““Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”” (Luke 7:50) or ““Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”” (Luke 8:48) This seems to imply that the healing is not physical only. These persons are no longer isolated, alienated from their communities. With God’s peace, they have courage to live full lives, to be in relationship in new and loving ways. I think Paul understood the special blessing of peace and its power to sustain communities. So many of his letters begin this way: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

(Romans 1:7) Perhaps loveliest of all are Paul’s words to the Philippians:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

“Sweet Peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave,
Let me once know.
I sought thee in a secret cave,
And ask'd, if Peace were there,
A hollow wind did seem to answer, No:
Go seek elsewhere.

I did; and going did a rainbow note:
Surely, thought I,
This is the lace of Peace's coat:
I will search out the matter.
But while I looked the clouds immediately
Did break and scatter.

Then went I to a garden and did spy

A gallant flower,
The crown-imperial: Sure, said I,
Peace at the root must dwell.
But when I digged, I saw a worm devour
What showed so well.

At length I met a rev'rend good old man;
Whom when for Peace

I did demand, he thus began:
There was a Prince of old
At Salem dwelt, who lived with good increase
Of flock and fold.

He sweetly lived; yet sweetness did not save
His life from foes.
But after death out of his grave
There sprang twelve stalks of wheat;
Which many wond'ring at, got some of those
To plant and set.

It prospered strangely, and did soon disperse
Through all the earth:
For they that taste it do rehearse
That virtue lies therein;
A secret virtue, bringing peace and mirth
By flight of sin.

Take of this grain, which in my garden grows,
And grows for you;
Make bread of it: and that repose
And peace, which ev'ry where
With so much earnestness you do pursue,
Is only there."

George Herbert

