

Sermon for Zion, February 10, 2019

Hymns: I've got peace like a river; It Is Well (1,3); 741 – Like a mighty river flowing; 740 – Make me a channel of your peace

Scripture: Isaiah 26:3-4; John 14:27-28; Galatians 5:22-23

Sermon Title: Perfect Peace

Isaiah 26:3-4 (NLT)

You will keep in perfect peace

all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!

Trust in the Lord always,

for the Lord God is the eternal Rock.

John 14:27-28

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.

Galatians 5:22-23

The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

I watched a film last week, and I'm still trying to recover from it. It is called "They Shall Not Grow Old," and it is a film comprised of original World War One footage, which, through incredible effort and technology, has been stunningly transformed into proper high-quality colour images, complete with sound. As the film says, "those who experienced WW1 did not live in a silent, black and white world." With astonishing power, this transformation makes the soldiers - and the unspeakable horror of their experience - very, very real.

As the film ended, I sat silent, tears in my eyes, wondering how nations – how people - could do this to one another. And not only 100 years ago – but again and again and again. When will the longing for peace ever overcome the seemingly insatiable thirst for war? "*I am for peace,*" cries the Psalmist (120:7), "*but when I speak of it, all they want is war.*"

And it is that longing for peace – peace as absence of war – which finds itself at the heart of the hundreds of prayers for peace contained within the pages of Scripture, prayers for the Day the Lord's promise will be fulfilled, when the Messiah shall set things right. The prophet Zechariah saw that distant Day (9:10): "*Shout and cheer, O Zion! Raise the roof, O Jerusalem! Your king is coming! A good king who*

makes all things right, a humble king riding a donkey, a mere colt of a donkey. I've had it with war—no more chariots in Ephraim, no more war horses in Jerusalem, no more swords and spears, bows and arrows. He will offer peace to the nations, a peaceful rule worldwide, from the four winds to the seven seas.” We join with countless, as we pray for that day of peace.

But peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is also the presence of harmony, of healthy relationship between ourselves and others, ourselves and the world. This is the best definition of the catch-all Hebrew word, “Shalom.”

When you meet someone in Israel, you say, “Shalom!” When you depart, you say it again. More formally, you may say “Shalom Aleichem,” Peace Be Upon You. If you say that to someone, they will inevitably respond, “Aleichem Shalom,” or, Upon You Be Peace. If you find yourself in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem, and you wish to greet an Arabic speaker, you will say, “As-Salaam-Alaikum,” and your Arabic friend will respond, “Wa alaikum assalaam.” It is both inspiring and deeply saddening to realise that what separates Jews and Arabs in the most common and basic of greetings is simple pronunciation. The words and meaning are the same.

And what is the full meaning of Shalom / Salaam? John Ortberg writes:

Shalom – “the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment and delight.” Try to imagine what such a state of affairs would look like.

In a world where shalom prevailed, all marriages would be healthy and all children would be safe. Those who have too much would give to those who have too little, Israeli and Palestinian children would play together on the West Bank; their parents would build homes for one another. Tabloids would be filled with accounts of courage and moral beauty.

Disagreements would be settled with grace and civility. Doors would have no locks. Cars would have no alarms. Schools would no longer need police presence or even hall monitors; students and teachers and janitors would honour and value one another's work. At recess, every kid would get picked for a team.

Churches would never split.

People would be neither bored nor hurried. No father would ever say “I'm too busy” to a disappointed child. Divorce courts and battered women shelters could be turned into community recreation centres.

No one would be lonely or afraid. People of different races would join hands; they would honour and be enriched by their differences and be united in their common humanity.

And in the centre of the entire community would be its magnificent architect and most glorious resident: the God whose presence fills each person with unceasing splendour and ever-increasing delight.

That is Shalom. That is peace. But peace is more than even that wonderful image. Peace is also freedom from the burden of worry. And that's an elusive peace indeed. Because we're worriers. In our own way, each of us are like Job, who said (Job 3:26) *"I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; only trouble comes."* In our own way, we are all Marthas, to whom Jesus said (Luke 10:41) *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."* Worried and distracted. Expecting trouble. That's us.

And it is to us worriers, then and now, that Jesus was speaking, in his timeless Sermon on the Mount. Listen (Matthew 6:25-34):

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the unbelievers run after all these things, and your heavenly Father already knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

And I'm sure there were one or two of you or me in the crowd that day, listening to that sermon, who said, "Yeah, right. It isn't that easy, Jesus. Worry isn't just a switch we can flip on and off. Because mine seems to be stuck on 'On.'"

But Jesus doesn't just say *"Don't worry."* He says, *"Focus on the things of God instead."* This is what Paul, who himself had plenty to justifiably be worried about, grabbed onto. And it is from prison, no less, facing a sentence of death, but not

seeming to be terribly worried about it, that Paul wrote these words to his friends, who were very worried about him – and about their own precarious situation (Philippians 4:6-7):

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace (God's peace!), which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

“You see,” say Jesus and Paul, “there’s peace, and then there’s God’s peace. One means the absence of something – conflict, trouble, war. The other means the presence of the Spirit of God within us, a presence which brings us comfort, no matter the situation we’re in, no matter the troubles we face. And that kind of peace only comes from God.”

The Psalmist knew that peace, the peace which comes from placing yourself in the hands of God. *“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe (Psalm 4:8)”* he sang. *“All who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm,”* the Proverb claims (1:33). That kind of peace comes from “changing the channel,” as it were, from the worries and strife of the world, to the assurance of God’s unending love and care for us, to the awareness of the presence of God’s Spirit within.

This “Peace of God” comes from being at peace with God – from turning to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and coming to know God not as a God of wrath, or as a distant impersonal force, but coming to know God as the loving Father of us all. *“This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all,”* preached Peter (Acts 10:36), who came to understand that this Good News extends to all who would call on the name of Jesus. To all people. To you. To me. It is a treasure, the Peace of God. It is a gift.

“Peace I leave with you,” says Jesus; *“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.”* Or in another translation, *“I am leaving you with a gift: peace of mind and peace of heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.”*

How do we receive this most precious of gifts? Well, it is a gift, but like any gift, its benefit comes to us as we make use of it. I remember when we gave Jacob an electric guitar for Christmas, many years ago. “But I don’t know how to play the guitar,” he said. “It comes with lessons,” we said, and only then, did he get excited

about it. The Peace of God comes with lessons too, and like learning to use any gift, requires a bit of effort on our part. *“Turn away from evil and do good,”* wrote the Psalmist (34:14); *“Search for peace, and work to maintain it.”*

And again and again, when we search the Bible for Peace, we find it tied together with Trust. It is what Paul was talking about, when he wrote to the Christians gathered in Rome (Romans 15:13): *“I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace **because you trust in him.** Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.”* It is what Jesus told the disciples, when he said (John 14:3), *“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”* And it is what Isaiah was getting at, 750 years before Jesus, in the words we read together at the start of our service (Isaiah 26:3-4):

*You, Lord, will keep in perfect peace
all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!
Trust in the Lord always,
for the Lord God is the eternal Rock.*

“Perfect peace,” writes Isaiah. It is a peace secure in the knowledge that we can place our trust in God; a peace that gains strength the more our focus is on God. *“Letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death,”* writes Paul (Romans 8:6), *“but focus your mind on the Spirit, and you’ll have life and peace.”* If you’ve ever wondered about the benefit of regular prayer and Bible reading, or of regular participation in worship, it is precisely this: it is focusing our minds on the Spirit, and it is through that focus, that we find peace.

Through Prayer, Bible Study and Worship, we draw closer to God, we come to know God better. And the better we know someone, the closer we are to them, the more meaningful their gift to us becomes. Many of us have gifts of some kind that derive their meaning entirely from our relationship with the giver – just think of that piece of art on Grandma’s fridge; it is cherished because it was drawn by that precious grandchild, not because it possesses some hidden artistic merit that only Grandma can see. What Grandma sees in that gift is her love for that child, and that child’s love for her.

Similarly, the more we come to know God, the more we study and read and come to learn about who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus, the more fully realised will be that gift of peace. This is why Peter says (2 Peter 1:2), *“May God give you more and more grace and peace **as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord.**”*

We do not live in a peaceful world. The senseless slaughter which moved me so powerfully in the images brought startlingly to life in “They Shall Not Grow Old,” carries on in our world today. For millions of men, women and children today – today! – peace is a distant dream. For many millions, Zechariah’s vision of “*a peaceful rule worldwide, from the four winds to the seven seas,*” will never be realised. On their behalf, we who follow the Prince of Peace must tirelessly, “*Turn away from evil and do good; Search for peace, and work to maintain it.*”

Even in our land of peace, there are many whose lives are fraught with worry, with worry born of illness, addiction, family strife, financial stress, keeping a roof over their head, or even finding a roof at all. With Job they cry, “*I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; only trouble comes.*” We who have the Good News of Jesus Christ must seek always to reach out to the worried, to the distraught, and proclaim in word and in deed, that there is hope, there is one who cares, who knows, in whom we can place our trust, and find a “*peace that passes all understanding.*”

And even we, secure of our next meal, living comfortable lives, sleeping in comfortable beds, even we are not immune from depression, from anxiety, from sleepless nights fearing what tomorrow might bring. We, who are “*worried and distracted by many things;*” we, too, need peace. And we have been given that very peace, as a gift; a gift which comes from the Spirit of God which dwells within us. It is, writes Paul, “*a fruit of the Spirit,*” together with “*love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” And like any gift, its value increases with our knowledge of and relationship with the giver; its strength grows the more we turn our minds to God, the more we learn to trust. More than peace, it is the Peace of God; it is “*A Perfect Peace.*”

And so, together with Jude, I pray this prayer for you (Jude 1:2): “*May God give you more and more mercy, peace, and love.*” And with Paul, I pray for my congregation the prayer he prayed for his (2 Thessalonians 3:16): “*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all.*” Amen.

Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26)

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

(John Ortberg excerpt from, “Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them.” Zondervan, 2009)