

“The Shape of Peace”

Isaiah 11:1-10; Philippians 4:4-9

December 4, 2022

While I was attending my grandmother’s funeral at St. John’s Episcopal Church over in Southeast Charlotte, I got lost. It’s a big church and I got turned around in it. There was nobody much wandering around where I was in the church that particular day and, given my shoddy geographical skills, I got really lost. I get lost all the time. The only thing that made this particularly interesting was what I saw painting on a staircase as I was ambling around St. John’s Episcopal Church. It declared loudly (the print was really large). Know Jesus (kn), kn(ow) peace. NO Jesus. No peace. It was a providential sign, really. Having gotten lost, my peace was completely gone and I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to ramble around the church for some time looking for my family. So, I was a little nervous. Seeing that sign made me put things into reality – the strong likelihood was that I’d find my way back before I starved or anything like that. The sign gave me a measure of peace. That allowed my mind to destress for a moment and figure a way out of my temporary predicament. Sometimes that’s all we need, just a moment or two of peace to clear our minds just a bit so that we can see past our anxiety and confusion into the solutions which are all around us. Sometimes, when life is particularly vexing, we’re going to need more than just a few minutes. We’re going to need to have something (or someone) in order to connect with in times of crisis. Because crisis can drain us like nobody’s business and the overall effect of a world still broken by sin is going to cause us problems. A lack of peace can bring us quickly to our knees.

I’ll never forget one time, experiencing the absolute antithesis of peace. Long before I was a pastor, even before I was a chef, really, I was a radio salesguy. That doesn’t mean I sold radios. No, I sold advertising time on a local rock and roll radio station. Now, I liked rock and roll but the older stuff. This new radio station I was working for, they played the newer rock groups. One of the groups we played, White Zombie, was doing a performance at the Charlotte Hornets Training facility in South Carolina if you remember that place. Anyway, we had tons of free tickets to it. Even though they definitely weren’t my cup of musical tea, I decided to go anyway. One of the DJs found out I was going and made a point to warn me, “Stay out of the mosh pit.” Now, I only partially understood this at the time but there is an area at certain rock concerts called the mosh pit. It’s basically a place you can go and slam your body into others musically, I guess. It’s a free for all and it’s not uncommon for people to walk away with minor injuries as the result of going in the mosh pit. Anyway, my DJ friend was really clear, you want to be away from the center front of the stage when the lights go down for the show. Well, the night of the event came and I wasn’t really paying much attention, when I realized, “Gee, I am standing right in front of the stage. The exact place where my knowledgeable friend told me not to be. Golly, I’d better get out of here.” Just as I was thinking that, no kidding, the lights went off and the first chords of this loud, oppressive heavy metal music came out. The next thing I know, it’s dark with flashing lights beaming me in the eyes, there’s this blaring music and now, bodies are literally slamming hard into mine. Worse still, the first blow had disoriented me. I had no idea which way was the most expedient out of the mosh pit. I was still getting slammed around pretty hard when I chose a direction, carefully headed in that direction, just trying to avoid these maniacal mosh pitters. In between the blaring music I didn’t like, the strange people seemingly intent on slamming into me with the full weight of their whole bodies and the overall lack of orientation I’d say it was like a small sliver of hell located right there in Gold Hill, South Carolina.

I remember that moment because, in it, I was the least peaceful in the moment I have ever been in my life. There have been other difficult moments, to be sure, but that one remains in my mind as a visceral reminder of what it is like to be completely without peace. Peace, I’m finding, is a commodity you value more as you age. When I was younger, a night out of the town of revelry sounded like just the ticket to fun. Now, no kidding, if I’m not in bed by nine pm, something is seriously wrong. So too do I value less, let’s call them, engaging, entertainments. That is to say I don’t require rock concerts any more to entertain me. A quiet night at home with the family is all I really want or need anymore.

Yes, what I long for more and more in this world more than anything else is peace. And what does the world want to give me? Well, it’s not peace, that’s for sure. As I survey these past few years, I see many, many things that have gone a long, long way to wrecking whatever peace we may have. Even though things have levelled out, COVID continues to exert a malevolent force on our society. Did you see where LA County is

considering returning to mask mandates again in a surge of the disease? Gone now from our midst are the masks but too frequently are we reminded of life in quarantine with all its' fears and anxieties. Complicating matters, inflation has gone haywire, for goodness sakes a dozen doughnuts now costs \$14! With a war laboring on in Europe, our sense of peace is ebbing low right now, isn't it?

That's what brings me back to that painting at St. John's Episcopal Church. In the absence of Jesus, there is no peace and boy does that make sense. Where the King of Peace does not dwell, one cannot expect to find any measure of tranquility. But for those with Jesus, as our New Testament passage this morning details, there is yet access to a peace that surpasses all understanding. Whenever I hear that bit of Scripture, my mind is always taken back to a particular evening when Ben was just a baby. As many of you know, those first couple of weeks of having a baby in the house for the first time are some hair-raising days, aren't they? Thankfully, Ruth Ann came in town for a couple of weeks right at the beginning. But eventually, she had to return to Clay in New Bern. I know, I cried the day she left. But, a few weeks after that, we had a routine and things were pretty calm. Then, one night, I remember being at home, Natalie and Benjamin had gone to sleep amid this amazing warm glow just took over my head and my heart. I was fully at peace and it was beyond all ability for words to describe just how content I was. That's the kind of depth of peace I know is possible when you Know Jesus Christ.

But I began to realize this week that getting to that level of peacefulness requires some outside help. And, remembering that signage at Saint John's Episcopal Church, we turn our attention now towards knowing Jesus. Because it's in the saving knowledge of our Lord that we encounter that peace that our souls desperately long for. One of the first and primary disruptors of our peace is our anxiety. Which is, I should point out, a nationwide epidemic right now. In 2021, it was projected that something like 62% of us were experiencing all-time highs when it came to fear and anxiety. We see this anxiety being worked out wrongly every single day in incidents like road rage or short tempers or airplanes. There is something very wrong in the state of America and it's that we're all running around, filled up with fear and anxiety and it's spilling out into our everyday lives in ways that are most unpleasant.

One of the greatest stressors of our life is our physical health. Nothing can so quickly rob us of our tranquility than a threat to our health. For this reason alone, COVID did a number of us. Do you remember the early days of the pandemic when every news article you read projected those really depressingly high fatality numbers? It was only understandable that we huddled around our tv's ensconced in our quarantined homes. But the Bible ensures our everlasting safety just as it promises us God's presence with us through all the difficulties of our lives. Just explore the Bible and find out that we are not alone here as we wander out way through our earthly days. We are all, at some level, concerned for our futures. But when that becomes an overriding fear, then things have gotten out of control. Thankfully, Scripture promises us some amazing things if we'll but listen to it. The first thing we've got to be aware of is that, even in crisis, even in mosh pits, we are not alone. Emmanuel, God with us. That's what Jesus did over 2000+ years ago when He came to Earth, a babe born in a barn, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger. And even though we're removed from Jesus in the flesh as He sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, we are never, ever removed from His presence through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, when trouble appears on the horizon, threatening your peace, turn to the pages of the Word to find your relief. **Psalm 32:7** – *“You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.”* The Psalmist declares the protection and peace that comes through the Lord. And, true to the psalm, don't we all sometimes just need a hiding place? I sure did yesterday as a routine trip to the grocery store took an abysmal turn when I ran into a car getting out of the parking lot. It was just the kind of boneheaded move that's bound to deflate any Christmas joy which might be percolating. When I got home, feeling awful for the blunder to say nothing of the costs of the deductible or the premiums going up in years to come, it felt like just the sanctuary a Christian home should be. I was greeted by my very understanding and supportive family. It was a place to get away from the bad stuff swirling around my home. And as wonderful a family home is, God can serve that function for us alone if we'll but allow Him.

God is like that for us. When the stuff starts to swirl and life becomes difficult, it's then when you really feel the presence of the Lord and it provides a strength and a steadfastness that are simply not achievable by our own power. **Isaiah 43:2** – *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall*

not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah’s words remind us that it’s in those dark and difficult places that life sometimes thrusts us that we are in the presence of the Almighty God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace doesn’t come as the obstacle is miraculously moved. Peace instead comes in the awareness that there is literally nothing on this earth which will see us separated from our God. **Romans 8:38-39** – *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* And, friends, as a pastor colleague who was facing cancer once told me, nothing means nothing. Not a thing. There is nothing in all of what’s present and in all of what remains invisible to us that will ever remove God’s loving presence from us. That’s like being all wrapped up in a warm blanket of peace no matter what gets thrown your way. But it isn’t just fears of the future or anxieties about our health which keep us away from the peace we so richly desire. So too can other things get in the way and inhibit our peace.

One of these things which works to rob us of our peace is our desire for material things. I sure hope this would be the answer but if you were to ask my mom when was the time, I was the biggest jerk, she would tell you it is when I wanted an Atari Game when I was a kid called Pitfall. Pitfall wasn’t much of a game by today’s standards but, back then, it was the bee’s knees. I wanted that game so badly but it wasn’t like birthday or Christmas around so I was forced to wait. I didn’t handle it very well being like 10 at the time and I mounted the most serious resistance to my parent’s authority ever. Didn’t EVER get the game. But what I did get were temper tantrums and groundings. Not exactly worth it for a silly little game, right? Too bad I haven’t learned my lesson. At some level, I can still be a creature of material comfort. And it’s when those comforts are removed from me that I can become a real jerk. Yes, materialism robs us of our peace as quickly as do threats to our health.

It’s for that reason that the Scripture strikes a dissonant note apparently here in America and the Yule season as it cautions against the accumulation of material blessings. **Ecclesiastes 5:10** – *“Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.”* **Timothy 6:7-8** – *“For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”* **Matthew 6:19-20** – *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* Each of these verses works to inform us about a real threat to our peace. Thankfully, the Scriptures give us the solution – care less about physical blessings. And the way we break the hold of materialism on our hearts? Be more generous, give more stuff, more things, more money away to people who need it.

When a young man, desirous of following Jesus, comes to Him laden with many things, what is it that Jesus says to this person? **Luke 18:22b** – *“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* If you find your peace at a low this holiday season, consider flipping the script. Instead of acquiring more stuff this holiday season, why not consider giving more away to people in need. Perhaps nothing so much robs us of our peace than when we sense that someone or something is working negatively in our lives. In Second Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul wants to tell the gathered church some good news. That members will be protected from the efforts of the wicked to waylay them. So, in the third chapter he declares, **Thessalonians 3:1-3** – *“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”*

But the greatest peace that can be found comes when you’re at peace with yourself. And how do we get there? The first and best way to know yourself is to know Jesus Christ. That there was a Savior who came because we were mired in death through our sins. And although we were still sinners, Christ died for us, the unrighteous. Because of His sacrificial death, Jesus atones for our sins and restores us into full fellowship with God the Father Almighty. But in order to get there, we have to do the one thing that rankles us down to the bone. We’ve got to confess. Confess that we aren’t everything we are cracked up to be. Confess that we are sinners.

That's when peace can truly arrive because you've given up that idolatrous façade in which you're large and in charge and simply accept yourself humbly as you are – a sinner saved by God's amazing grace.

As that becomes the signature facet of our personalities, our hearts soften, our pride dissipates, and we're left standing in the sweet union with our God in Christ. That's when a peace that surpasses all understanding can invade your heart, set your world to rights and bask in the warm afterglow of Christ's ongoing presence.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Psalms 32:7 – “You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.”

Isaiah 43:2 – “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you,”

Romans 8:38-39 – “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Ecclesiastes 5:10 – “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless

1 Timothy 6:7-8 – “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

Matthew 6:19-20 – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Luke 18:22b – “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

2 Thessalonians 3:1-3 – “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.