

Hebrews 1: 1-12

John 14: 27

Today, this second reading that we gather around is a very short text, just one verse out of the Gospel of John, where Jesus gives the promise and gift of peace, abiding peace that will stay with his disciples once he is gone. It comes in the midst of Jesus' farewell discourse, a section that is unique to John's gospel, but follows the tradition of farewell narratives in other writings of the day. It would have been familiar to see a respected leader anticipating their departure or death to follow a few patterns: to appoint a successor, to comfort those left behind, and to announce their departure or death. Jesus does this, in a certain sense, but the "successor" he appoints is the Holy Spirit, and the comfort he offers is this promise of peace. Both of our texts for this morning speak to the way Christ dwells with us, through the Holy Spirit, in a long-standing, never-failing way. And at the core of that is this sense of "peace," something that is from God, and distinctly different from worldly peace. Still, it can be hard for me to wrap my mind around what Christ's peace really means.

We use this language so frequently in church that it is easy to feel comfortable with it. But Jesus leaves us with a bit of a puzzle, particularly when he emphasizes that the peace *he* offers is not the same as the peace of the world. What does Jesus really mean when he speaks of peace in this context? Is peace the absence of conflict? Is it about life being easy? Is it just churchy language for general "niceness"? There is plenty of evidence in the gospels that Jesus doesn't avoid conflict, and certainly he lives a life that is far from easy, and on many occasions he's not the "nicest" guy in the room, prioritizing truth-telling over maintaining social niceties. So the peace of Christ is not likely to be one of those simplified views of it.

As I was reflecting on the complexity of this idea of peace, a certain tune kept running through my mind. Bear with me, it's a Christmas song and I don't want to rush this nice autumn season away, but I kept thinking about the refrain of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." You might recognize it:

*"I heard the bells on Christmas Day,
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat,
Of peace on earth good will to all."¹*

¹ Many versions of this tune use the language "good-will to men," but I've adjusted it to a more gender-inclusive version with the same meaning.

It's a lovely tune, and that first verse can catch you in our worldly understanding of peace, conjuring up cozy images of snow-covered streets, rich cups of hot cocoa, and warm fires on Christmas a morning. But if you're familiar, the song continues and gets to a more heart-wrenching verse, one where this picturesque peace is hard to find:

*“And in despair, I bowed my head.
‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said.
‘For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth good will to all.”*

Every time I've heard this song I get shivers when we arrive at those lines. It's troubling and sad, revealing what can sometimes be the underbelly of broad declaration of “peace on earth.” Often, we look around and don't see peace in our lives or in the world in the way that we hope we might. We think we're on a stable path, but then get a bad diagnosis, hear news of another mass shooting, or learn that a friend is going through something heart-wrenching. And far too often a culture of toxic positivity tells us it's not okay to dwell in those harder places while still trusting the peace of Christ.

I didn't know this until I was looking into it more, but the text of this song actually comes from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which he wrote in 1863, two years after his wife died in a house fire and shortly after his son left home to join the Union Army in the Civil War. Longfellow had hoped his son wouldn't go to war, and between when this poem was written and published, he was severely wounded in the Battle of Mine Run. The original poem has a few stanzas with even more vivid images of despair than appear in the song. One goes:

*“It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

In this poem, and this song, that refrain of “peace on earth” takes on almost a taunting tone at points. It forces us to confront what we really mean when we speak about the peace of Christ in the midst of violence, grief, loss, and loneliness. Peace on earth, good will to all, does not mean everything will be easy or everything will be comfortable. Longfellow knew that, Jesus knew that as he gave this farewell speech, and I imagine each of you in this room have experienced some place where life is hard or disappointing or frightening, but somehow this sense of peace from God remains.

Returning to our verse for the day, when Jesus shares this idea that his gift of peace will remain with the world, he also is not promising that things will be easy or comfortable. He's on the brink of something truly terrifying in his own life, and is trying to empower his followers to continue on with confidence in God, even when the next things in his and their story might seriously shake their belief that all is well in the world. This

promise of peace is not necessarily unfamiliar to the disciples, it's something that the Roman Empire would claim to provide time and time again, an assurance rooted in military might and state power. Military leaders could rally communities behind the idea that peace would be given to those aligned with *power*. That kind of peace looks like protection from violent threats, stability for the elite, and fortification against external enemies. But the peace that Jesus offers is different. It doesn't promise safety. It doesn't guarantee stability. It doesn't even assure basic survival. Within a very short time, rooted in this peace, Jesus will die, and his disciples will be thrown into a time of uncertainty and fear. This peace is not given as the world gives. It's not an assurance of safety or good-vibes-only, and yet it circles around us in the hardest of times. It draws near to us even while "hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will to all."

When I think of worldly peace today, it's a little less rooted in military power than it might have been for people in the Roman Empire, but the peace that society tries to sell us still relies heavily on some kind of outside assurance that things will be okay. It often privileges the powerful and the wealthy. When things fall apart, it leaves us disappointed. In our society we get excited about a view of peace that means family dinners without argument, bipartisan agreement, or a friendly view of people getting along despite their differences. I think that in communities like Ann Arbor it is really easy for us to put this kind of peace on a pedestal. Wouldn't it be lovely if everywhere was a utopian community, with tree-lined streets, lots of little free libraries, good public schools, protected bike lanes...that's a nice kind of peace. But I don't think it is what Jesus is presenting when he offers the gift of peace.

Far too often, that kind of peace—rooted in "niceness" upholds the unjust power dynamics of our world. It keeps us from noticing places of pain, inequality, and injustice. It keeps us from questioning why resources for Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti schools are so different. When we can comfortably hide behind the "peace" of affluence or privilege, we can overlook the needs in the world that God might be calling us to notice. And when that worldly peace fails—when we realize our bodies are not invincible, our support systems come up short, or there's just not a way to put a shiny bow on a particularly difficult circumstance, it's easy to feel lonely and disappointed. The peace that the world gives falls short again and again.

In contrast, the peace of Christ does not insulate us from the pain of the world, but it does meet us in that pain. The peace of Christ does not favor the wealthy or the powerful, it abides with the poor and the powerless and helps us see ourselves in one another. The peace of Christ is not fearful that resources will run short, but calls us all to come together and work to make sure there is enough for all. The peace of Christ is *wildly* countercultural, and it relies on love winning out over fear. When Jesus commissions his disciples with this gift of peace, he's not

promising them that the next part of their story will be easy. And yet, he confidently tells them “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

“Do not fear” is a common refrain in the Bible. It’s a phrase that accompanies the Israelites enduring the Babylonian exile in Isaiah 41, that meets Mary when she learns of Jesus’s conception, and that comforts Peter, James, and John when they fall to their knees terrified at the transfiguration. It’s told to nervous disciples on a boat, grieving women at the empty tomb, and an uncertain Paul meeting new communities in the book of Acts.² And yet, by itself, I sometimes wonder how comforting this admonition would be. When I’m in a terrifying situation, I don’t particularly want to just be told “it’s fine, don’t be afraid,” even if the one telling me that is the God of the universe. And so that’s why I love Jesus’s full statement here which gives the concrete gift of peace, and then the reminder to not be afraid. In each of those examples I just gave, one way or another, someone is told *both* “do not be afraid” *and* “God is with you.” Here in John, that reminder of God’s presence appears as a lasting gift of peace which comes with the Holy Spirit.

What could our world look like if we were able to live without fear? If we could truly trust that the peace of God is with us, would we dare to take risks that we might otherwise avoid? The peace of the world appears to us as something that is fragile, to be handled delicately, at risk of toppling at any point. But the peace of God is strong, faithful, and ever-present. How could this peace encourage us to face the world with warmth and openness, looking for the best for others even when we are disappointed? How might this peace encourage us to seek justice for all, even when it comes at the expense of our own self-interests? How might this peace encourage us to choose love even when it comes with less security? It’s a frightening proposition. But through all our doubts, uncertainties and disbelief, Jesus comes back with this simple call: “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.”

May it be so.

² Scripture references: Isaiah 41:10; Luke 1:30; Matthew 8:26; Mark 4:40 and Matthew 28:5; Acts 18: 9-10.