

Sermon July 8, 2007 (8:00 AM)

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

On Friday morning I had an appointment to meet someone in Bethesda at 7:15, so I woke up about 5:30 to get ready to go. That's a lot earlier than my usual wake-up time, but that kind of discomfort is greatly eased by knowing that when I open my apartment door, there will be the Washington Post already delivered. As I've mentioned before, I am a less-than-anonymous "newsaholic" and I still feed that addiction by way of the newspaper as well as radio and TV.

I know I can usually expect these days that the front-page headlines will be something about terrorism and war, either about the events themselves, or political responses to terrorism and war. That gets a little old, like talking about the weather..

For a fresher outlook, I have always tried to adhere to the advice I received from some of the best mentors I had in my seminary days: to keep in front of me, as I prepared sermons, both the newspaper and the bible.

The good news this morning is not from the newspaper: it's from the bible. What stands out for me is the word "Peace"—in both Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia, and in Jesus' sending his followers out on their missionary journey. If this sermon had a title it would be "The Recovery of Peace."

Like the word "Love", the word "Peace" in the Bible is a many-splendored thing. However, it can get a little shopworn. After the Confession and Absolution in the service this morning I will invite you to greet one another as I say, "The Peace of the Lord be always with you." And we greet each other dutifully and pleasantly, just as we would in other cultures greet each other with the word "Shalom."

But Peace and Shalom are not just greetings, and "Peace" is not just an end of hostilities. Peace and Shalom in their fullness have the depth of wholeness, completeness, at-one-ness with God and with our brothers and sisters. Christ's work is to bring peace. That's why "peace" and "grace" are often linked together—the fullness of peace as a gift from God.

The amazing gift of God, by Christ dying on the Cross, to break down all that divides us, can only be described as a “new creation” as we read this morning. The hope of peace as “Shalom” in the Old Testament is now fully realized as the peace through Christ. That “Peace” holds together God and humanity and breaks down all the barriers of race and gender and culture that have divided us.

That kind of “Peace” is what had been realized then, and what is yet to be realized in our time. It is to that “Great Commission” as his followers that the Lord of the harvest invites us this morning! The familiarity of old words should never dull-down the freshness of that invitation.

The Greek word for “peace” usually meant simply the “absence of war or conflict. If that were all that we could hope for as citizens and as Christians it would not be enough to warrant our faith and devotion. However, In the New Testament use of that Greek word for peace the word also acquires, thanks to the gift of Jesus Christ, much of the range of “Shalom’ and some new, specifically Christian understandings.

The peace of God or the peace of Christ may rule people’s hearts. (Col. 3:15) A mind set on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6) The God of hope may fill one with joy and peace (Romans 15:13.) All of our understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation as a gift of peace through Christ begins to emerge. If Jesus is really the Messiah, then “peace”—as justice, righteousness, and tranquility in life within human community—can be realized.

It is to that hope and peace that I believe we must turn if we are going to ask, and find answers to the big questions of life: questions such as. What can I trust? Am I on my own? How can I face the future?”

But as people think about those questions in these difficult days I get the impression that there is a pretty gloomy shadow hanging over our minds and hearts these days. It’s not just the events themselves—it’s a different mind-set now than it was, say fifty years ago.

I graduated from seminary in 1956. I went to a 75-year-old church that had never had a full-time priest. We went from a total congregation of 25 men, women and children to build a new parish house and to be in six years a self-supporting parish of over 200. It was that kind of time, which many old-timers at St. James' still remember. But after the 50's and early 60's that sense of "religious revival" began to fade, as we look back with the better vision of hindsight. In the rapid pace of change in every direction we began to lose what theologians would call the "state of being grasped by an ultimate concern." It was replaced by the sense of human achievement, power, and progress of which the conquest of outer space was the most significant sign. As one theologian said, "in this period, life in the dimension of depth is replaced by life in the horizontal dimension."

As the preacher to Harvard University, Peter Gomes, writes, "we put our trust in technology, economic success, and gave our ultimate institutional loyalties to the government, to the universities and colleges, and to the church. Now we are not warmed but chilled by the terrors of our technology, the universities have not been able even to stem the dumbing -down of the culture, our governments have lied to us and continue to stumble in disrepute, and the churches have been reduced to mere observers status, as men and women in search of a soul feel they have to look elsewhere for meaning."

To one degree or another I'm aware that these objects of our trust have failed, and yet, maybe even because of these manifest failures, the issue of a loyalty worthy of our trust is even greater now than it was then. So the search for the good life, a life of shalom, wholeness, completeness, peace, is much less distracted by the idols and false gods we thought we could rely on in the good old days. The search is potentially more pure, more focused and more acute than it was before. That is why most people are realistic in not looking for a religious "revival" or "resurgence" these days but instead are seeing the honest search for meaning and peace to be a journey, a pilgrimage, beginning from and reaching down into the interior reaches of our souls.

It is at that level where we can begin to really find "the peace of God which passes all understanding." And, literally by asking the good questions, "Am I on my own?" and "how can I face the future?" begin to find the answers that can give us hope and peace.

In some ways the preoccupation on terror by our president and some presidential candidates may serve us well by focusing our energy and deflecting our consciousness from the poverty of resources we sometimes sense in our search for peace and wholeness. But that can lead to despair—unless that despair can be turned into hope.

If I say that hope must be underneath any peace of life worth finding, it is not because hope gets us out of trouble, but it does get us through. Hope as the foundation of true peace is not the enterprise of last resort; it is the quality that transcends both failure and success, for it substitutes what is ultimate for what otherwise is only temporary.

As I try to think of these things as I read and listen to what's happening in the world around us-- and how to say anything helpful about it in less than fifteen minutes-- I am reminded and supported by the witness of people like Martin Luther King to the power of a future hope in which the promises of God would be fulfilled, and Pope John Paul II writing to and about young people in his book "Crossing the Threshold of Hope"

And I am reminded that the content of that hope which underlies any peace worth having is Christ. Whatever else you can say about Jesus Christ, I pray that you can say as Paul did, "He IS our peace."

That's the good news this morning. That's the message we are called to share with others. For with that hope we can look up, dare to look inside ourselves, and to face the world unafraid. AMEN