

TRUE PEACE

A Sermon by The Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on the First Sunday after Easter, April 23, 2017



Lectionary Reading: John 20:19-31

Something Different This Time; **L**et's Pump up the Adrenaline

I have preached about doubt many times in my 21-year career, and I thought I'd do something different this time. As I read the scriptural passage and prepared for this sermon, I noticed how many times the subject of peace comes up. Peace and doubt are all intertwined. Peace isn't easy to preach about, and it's all about peace this morning. Peace is one of those churchy words, but what does it really mean?

I need to admit that there is some adrenaline needed to get up here and preach. I am much calmer than I used to be. For my very first sermon, I had an out-of-body experience watching myself walk up the steps to the pulpit. I was that nervous. It's gotten better, but you still need some adrenaline to do this job, to do it well.

At peace? Not exactly. I mean it depends on how you define peace. I am primarily at peace, and I wanted to give you that gift of peace this morning.

A Humongous Peace Sign **W**on't Fit My Door; Hang It

I brought my peace sign with me. I own one, as you can see up front on the floor in front of our communion table. This sign hangs on my wall now because I am not good with dimensions. I admit it. Look at that humongous wreath and know that about three years ago, I ordered it from a catalog for my front door. So take a good look at that sign. When it arrived in the mail, I could not believe the size of the box. Oh my, I thought, and opened it up and decided that's not going on my front door. It was for Christmas, and sometimes I have lights on it. But I've always wanted that peace symbol.

In the 1970's, there was a beautiful prize on the Wildwood boardwalk. It was a peace symbol, purple and sparkly. I tried my best to win the gift of peace that way but was never successful.

Where Does Peace Come from? From the Magic of Wikipedia

Well, first, let's ask ourselves: Using the magic of Wikipedia, where did the peace symbol come from? That symbol on the floor is one of many peace symbols. I'll read to you from what I got off Wikipedia:

"A number of peace symbols have been used in many ways in various cultures and contexts. The dove and the olive branch [were] used symbolically by early Christians and then eventually became a secular peace symbol, popularized by Pablo Picasso after World War II.

"In the 1950's, the 'peace sign,' as it is known today, was designed by Gerald Holtom as the logo for the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a group at the forefront of the peace movement in the United Kingdom. It was later adopted by antiwar and counterculture activists in the United States and elsewhere.

"The V hand signal and the peace flag also became international peace symbols."

That's a little bit about our earlier symbols. From classical antiquity comes this description:

"The use of the olive branch as a symbol of peace in Western civilization dates at least to the Fifth Century BC in Greece. The olive branch, which the Greeks believed represented plenty and drove away evil spirits, was one of the attributes of Eiréné, the Greek goddess of peace. Eiréné (whom the Romans called Pax), appeared on Roman Imperial coins with an olive branch."

Put the Peace Olives to Good Use; Drop Them in Your Drinks

I love olives anyway, but isn't that great to know? If you eat olives and put them in your drinks, you are driving away evil spirits. Nice to know.

"The Roman poet Virgil (70-10 BC) associated 'the plump olive' with Pax, and he used the olive branch as a symbol of peace in his *Aeneid*."

Here are some further notes on the use of peace symbols in politics and in Christianity:

"On the Great Seal of the United States (1782) the olive branch denotes peace: 'The olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace and war, which is exclusively vested in Congress.'" The eagle's head is faced toward the olive branch as a sign of peace.

"The use of a dove as a symbol of peace originated with early Christians, who portrayed baptism accompanied by a dove, often on their sepulchers.

The Dove Flies from Noah's Ark, Winds up in Daniel's Lions' Den

“The New Testament compared the dove to the spirit of God that descended on Jesus during his baptism. Christians saw similarities between baptism and Noah's Flood. The first Epistle of Peter compared the salvation through water in baptism to Noah's salvation through water in the Flood.

“Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 220) compared the dove, who ‘announced to the world the assuagement of divine wrath, when she had been sent out of the Ark and returned with the olive branch,’ to the Holy Spirit who descends in baptism in the form of a dove that brings the peace of God, sent out from the heavens.

“At first, the dove represented the subjective personal experience of peace, the peace of the soul, and, in the earliest Christian art, it accompanies baptism. By the end of the Second Century, it also represented social and political peace, ‘peace unto the nations,’ and from the Third Century it began to appear in depictions of conflict such as Noah and the Ark, Daniel and the Lions' Den, the three young men in the furnace, and Susannah and the Elders.

“The dove appears in Christian inscriptions in the Roman catacombs, sometimes accompanied

by the words *in pace* (Latin for ‘in peace’). For example, in the Catacomb of Callixtus a dove and a branch are drawn next to a Latin inscription meaning ‘Nicella, God's virgin . . . the well-deserving one in peace.’ In another example, a shallow-relief sculpture shows a dove with a branch flying to a figure marked as Eiréné, or peace.”

Doubting Thomas Gets a Bad Rap; I Recap the Story

So why talk about peace anyway in a story that centers so much on doubt? Poor Thomas — he gets a bad rap (John 20:24-29). I can briefly recap the passage for you:

It begins the night of Easter, and the disciples have locked themselves in The Upper Room to prevent being discovered as Jesus' followers. Because he was crucified, they were still very much afraid, not sure what was going on, and the women have told them that Jesus was risen, or that he wasn't in his tomb. The disciples didn't know what to make of that. Back in the day, in the ancient Near East, women weren't allowed to give evidence in court cases, so no one would have believed them in something as monumental as the reappearance of Jesus after his death.

John's gospel says that Peter and John ran to the grave, saw it was empty, and they believed or were not sure — not until Jesus showed up through a locked door. He is the same, but he is very different, and the first words out of his mouth are “Peace be with you.” He says it three times, actually, so it's notable.

But having said “Peace be with you,” he gives them the gift of the holy spirit.

Where Did Thomas Go? Why?

The disciples are stunned, probably terrified, amazed, and Thomas wasn't with them. You have to wonder where he was. Where did he go that first night? And he missed such an amazing visit. We don't know where he went and why. Thomas' response is one of doubt, and that's how he came down to us in history.

Before that, the only hint of Thomas we got was, when Jesus was talking about Jerusalem, Thomas turned to the disciples and said, “Let us go and die with him, if need be.” So he was actually kind of courageous. But in this crucial moment, he doesn't come across well. He misses this visit and says, “I do not believe you at all. Unless I see the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Jesus Speaks, “Peace Be with You”

A week later, Jesus reappears, and once again the first words out of his mouth were “Peace be with you.” He turns to Thomas and says, “Touch me and believe.” Thomas replies, “My Lord and my God!” He doesn't even need to touch Jesus, who then says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” All of us here, whatever they say, we do believe, and we have not seen. That was not the way the disciples acted.

Jesus speaks of peace three times to his stunned disciples. It's his initial divine gift, the gift of Easter, and it's peace. So think about it. Do you feel at peace this morning, we people of Easter?

The bible speaks of peace more than two hundred times, and I want to read to you a couple of passages, famous passages about peace. We speak about peace a lot at church. Do we feel it? Do we have it?

Numbers 6:25-27 — A famous blessing. We use it here in our church.

“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.
So they shall put thy name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Judges 6:22-24 — An old story about Gideon. He was a hero in Judges a long time ago.

“Then Gideon perceived that it was the Angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, ‘Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face,’ but the Lord said to him, ‘Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.’ Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it, ‘The Lord is peace.’ To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.”
Do we think of the Lord as peace?

Psalms 4:7-8 — “You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.”
Peace, fall asleep. No anxiety, no fear.

Isaiah 52:6-8 — “Therefore, my people shall know my name; therefore,
in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.

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.’
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.”
Beautiful, beautiful words that we pray for.

But we don’t have the experience of peace
in this world as we read and hear the news
— all those soldiers killed in Afghanistan.
Blessed is the messenger who brings words
of peace. If only that were true. It’s an
Easter gift. Our reaction to God, to any kind
of divinity, to a vision, to an angelic levita-
tion, to an experience of the divine in any
way is to be stunned, scared, overwhelmed.

Frequently in the Bible, the word is given
back by an angel, a visitor: Jesus is peace,
or do not be afraid. The angels said to the
shepherd in the Christmas story: “Do not be

afraid.” And here Jesus gives the gift of
peace. It’s the first thing he does because he
knows how the disciples feel. God knows
how we feel when divinity breaks through.
And this gift of peace is a very good gift.

In Hebrew, the word “shalom” is richer,
fuller than we know. Maybe you have heard
a sermon preached on this a time or two, so I
will not go into it deeply, but shalom is a
beautiful word, and it is used like aloha:
Hello and goodbye. Shalom is a great word,
and I will read to you all the meanings of it:

Completeness in number
Safety, soundness in body
Welfare, health, prosperity
Peace, quiet
Tranquility, contentment
Peace, friendship
Human relations
Peace with God

Peace from war
Well
Favor
Friend
Great
Good health
Perfect
Eiréné (the Greek word for peace)

Peace can be a state of national tranquility, exemption from rage and the havoc of war. Peace between individuals can mean harmony and concord. It means security, safety, prosperity, and felicity because peace and harmony make and keep things safe and prosperous. It can also mean specifically the Messiah's peace, the peace of Christ.

According to a conception distinctly peculiar to Christianity, peace is "the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is," peace is used of those who, assured of salvation, tranquilly await the return of Christ and the transformation of all things which will accompany that event.

There you have it, the meanings of peace.

Our Ritual: Passing the Peace

We began our worship service with our well-known ritual of passing the peace. Some people avoid it, but many of us get up from our pews and circle around the sanctuary. Not all churches do this. I happen to think it's truly a gift to be this friendly. You can stay in your pew if you want. No one is going to make you pass the peace with everyone in the church. But it is quite something that we do this every Sunday morning. My prayer is that we feel it as we pass the gift of peace. It's a gift of God.

True peace is something we all want, isn't it? For our world too — Syria, Afghanistan, the rest of the Middle East, North Korea — Wouldn't it be nice if the current leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, would get up tomorrow morning (which is today already) and say, you know, I'm not going to blow off any more missiles, whether they go off

or not. I'm going to be a man of peace. I'm going to try to get along with everybody.

What Does Peace Look Like?

We do want peace for ourselves, our homes, our families, our friends, our offices, our neighborhoods. But what should peace look like? Is it the total absence of anxiety? No fighting, no disagreement, ever? Total contentment? Meditate all day every day?

Yesterday was Earth Day. I want to take note of that. I thought to myself, what should I do for Earth Day? I did plant a bulb out front, as I do with all my Easter plants. It's a day to celebrate our beautiful earth, to worship nature. As I was thinking about peace and writing this sermon, nothing, I think, brings me more peace than nature itself. I know that sometimes nature is not peaceful, and we know this when storms, floods, and big snowstorms come rampaging through like Stella.

Maybe some people, like my residents, are at peace as they watch the snow float down for many hours. But for the rest of us, we had to get our snowblowers and shovels out. Maybe it wasn't all that peaceful. It was very peaceful that night, though, shoveling all that snow. Not a lot of sound. Snow can bring peace.

A Deep Connection with Peace and Earth

To be really truthful, though, the beach and the mountains, beautiful flowers, trees — all these things bring an inner contentment and peace to me that almost nothing else does. And maybe that is the same for you. There's a deep connection between peace and the earth.

If only we could go out to a drive-through window like Burger King, order some true peace, and have it handed to us right after church today. I wish we could, but it doesn't work that way, does it? I know that, like grace, peace is a gift from God, so it's unearned, and you can't always count on it. It can come and go, just like that feeling of grace, that feeling of our relationship with God, that feeling that Jesus is right here with us and in our hearts.

But it can be worked on too. In Matthew 5:9, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." We can't feel peace always in our hearts, but maybe we can work for peace like Mahatma Ghandi, a peacemaker who sought the path of nonviolent resistance and led India to independence. Martin Luther King Jr., who based a lot of his work on Ghandi, was another peacemaker seeking change without violence.

Clearing out Death Row by Executing Prisoners

Bryan Stevenson, the current spiritual book group author, wrote *Just Mercy*, a powerful book that really does wake you up. He is a lawyer, and he has worked through donations basically down South, helping prisoners to get out of being put to death, especially innocent prisoners who are lan-

guishing on death row, who were put there for specious reasons.

In fact, just in the paper I've been noticing how many articles are about our criminal justice system, about the county jail. There was an editorial yesterday about capital punishment. Arkansas is rushing to put all their death-row prisoners to death before the chemical being used goes bad, and even then it's not the right chemical. We're the only country that does that.

I'm really looking forward to sitting down with Chris Mogensen and talking about our county jail. We pray for prisoners every Sunday. Bryan Stevenson says the true opposite to poverty is justice. He is a peacemaker. And blessed is he, for he's a child of God. We are Easter people, like this group of disciples in the Upper Room, and we are being given the gift of true peace all the time.

My prayer is that we feel it today. That we feel it this week, but it makes a difference. It's not just words or a symbol that looks cool on a wall, but we feel it in our hearts. And even if we don't feel it especially, maybe we can try to be peacemakers in our world.

Amen.