

## EASTER SIX, YEAR C, MAY 22, 2022

There's a long-standing joke about beauty pageant contestants that when asked what they hope and wish for the answer is "world peace". We would all love to have world peace. It's not far from our minds especially with the war in Ukraine, tensions in the middle east and some kind of civil war, drug war and terrorist aggression in 17 other countries currently in the world. Our world is anything-but peaceful most of the time. And what little peace it has to offer us is always provisional, suspect, and precarious. The world cannot give what it does not firmly possess itself. A poor man can promise you all the money in the world if he has none to give you in the end. A world in love with war can promise you peace but in the end there's seldom enough real and lasting peace to go around.

However, I do believe most of us would not only like to have world peace but have some personal peace. Sometimes our lives become such a whirlwind, that we feel we're living on the edge or going from one catastrophe to another. What about the anxiety we live with – the fear of Covid and the next variant, fear of what's happening to our children and grandchildren, fear of crime, fear of debilitating illness, fear of not being able to handle these problems. How many of you feel that you just seem to get over the bad news of a relatives illness when someone else in the family or even yourself gets sick or is in trouble. How many of you have asked, when is this going to end, when am I going to find some peaceful moments in my life. When is the turmoil going to stop.

If there is to be peace at all, it has to come from somewhere else. That's where Jesus comes in, of course. This morning's gospel story is about peace. It is a story that has Jesus telling his disciples that he leaves them with his peace. What exactly does Jesus mean by this. What kind of peace is he talking about?

To be perfectly clear, Jesus' peace does not mean an absence of anxiety or fear or some kind of blissful happiness. Jesus' peace has its roots in the Hebrew word shalom which means to be whole or complete.

Now shalom can mean the end of hostilities between rival groups or nations. It can mean the restoration of a broken relationship between family members or neighbors in which harmony replaces hostility and alienation. It can also be used as a common greeting as in peace be with you. In each and every case, the root understanding of the blessing of peace is that it is from God and that it is to restore wholeness and restoration within ourselves and the well being of others.

It's this Hebrew understanding of peace which under girds the peace that Jesus gives to us. This is not the peace of escapism. It is not religion as a pacifier or religion as a safe harbor from the storms of existence. It is not about making peace at all costs – a false peace assumes to make life comfortable and risk-less. It is not about conformity either. To the contrary, the peace of Jesus is the power of the Holy conferred upon us to be and do what God wants done in the world.

The peace that passes all understanding is Jesus present in us emboldening us to act in the face of simple fear or of numbing hardship to do the work of God. Unlike the peace of the world which is mostly predicated on power or circumstances working out favorably on one's own behalf, the peace which Jesus gives is independent of outward circumstances. It is beyond human control. It is a gift. A paradoxical gift which comforts yet stirs up. It gentles the spirit as well as agitates it.

God's peace, is greater than anything we can desire or imagine because it is tied to God's vision. And God's vision encompasses everything that we declare in our baptismal covenant, justice and peace among all people. It demands respect for the dignity of every human being. Shalom, God's peace, means becoming a people who seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. It means no longer asking the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus is commissioning us to be those who bring this vision of God's Shalom to all people and to all the nations. In giving us this parting gift, Jesus invites us to submerge ourselves in these waters of peace. It is the most difficult part for us as Christians to do. Vengeance and hate is easier – peace is a lot harder and far more difficult.

Somehow, each of us needs to find an alternate path to the terrible hatreds at work in our society which cause us to say and do evil things to people or to make hurtful judgments about others that makes us look for the negative in people rather than the positive. How will we find that path?

The more we focus on the words of Jesus, on his own life of love, forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, grace and peace, the more the still and powerful voice of God can well up within us. The more we hear the proclamation of Christ's resurrection, the more we can be convinced that we too are offered new hope and new life.

Perhaps this understanding of peace can be best illustrated by the story of a contest that was held to produce a painting of peace. Many paintings were judged until only two pictures remained veiled. As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd. A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. Surely this was the winner.

Then the other painting was unveiled and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be peace? A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; toward the swirling open sea and you could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power. A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcends all earthly turmoil.

This is the peace that passes all understanding. Christ's peace is the unwavering assurance that God has made a home in our hearts. Peace, which is not of this world, comes when we learn to how to hope beyond what we know is possible. Peace is the presence of hope in the midst of life and death. It is a little crazy to hope this way, for this is not the kind of peace which the world can give. This is the peculiar peace which comes when one embraces the spirit of Christ. Jesus was one who dared to hope for the world and for those who were around him. And even in struggle, sorrow and great suffering, he knew God loved him and he was a Child of God. This is the peace of God's gift to us in the life of Jesus.

Our peace, is not a shield that protects us. Rather, it is a force that empowers us. Our peace is a confidence that God is God, that God loves the world, that God is for us and not against us, and that, through Christ, God has made that love real and visible.

And that's why that artists painting of peace is so appropriate because it depicts the raging of the storm that continually goes on around us and that we will always be a part of us yet shows that when we put Christ at the center of our lives we can live in the storm and survive. Christ's peace gives us the courage to go forward even when we know we are going to be battered by the storm.

Our peace is nothing more or less than the certainty of God's presence in all of life. That is a peace that the world cannot give. But it is the peace that passes all our understanding. Amen.