

“Finally...Peace!”

Luke 2:22-40

December 30, 2018

1st Sunday After Christmas

Finally....peace! After a continuously overbooked schedule, a maddening amount of shopping, a household of guests, and an inordinate amount of worship services this month, many people are looking for some peace and quiet at this time of year. I think that is why attendance at Divine Service on the 1st Sunday after Christmas (like attendance at the 1st Sunday after Easter, is often quite lean. People are just exhausted.

However, this is but a microcosm of life in general. People are always searching for that elusive, fleeting, and difficult to find thing called peace. We talk about peace a lot. We sing about peace, especially in many of our Christmas hymns. We try to make peace or feel at peace. But we fail so often in our efforts to obtain peace. In our Gospel reading for today, a man named Simeon claims to have peace. What is his secret?

First of all, in order to obtain and experience peace, we have to know what we are looking for. Most people define peace in a negative way. By that, I mean peace is viewed as a lack of something. In terms of war, peace is the lack of fighting. In interpersonal relationships, peace is the lack of conflict. According to this definition, peace is rather an empty thing.

Peace is also viewed as a feeling. To have peace is to always feel at peace. To define anything in terms of our feelings is risky because our feelings often change. Peace will be an even more elusive thing to find if it requires us to feel at peace since our feelings are so often fragile and undependable.

The biblical understanding of peace is much different. Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace involves more than the lack of something in a negative sense. It does involve that, but so much more. The Biblical concept of peace is the possession of something in a positive sense. Shalom is a perfect and complete state of well-being for body, mind, and soul.

Notice that I did not say a feeling of well-being. While peaceful feelings are beneficial and enjoyable, biblical peace is not a feeling. It is a state of well-being which is true whether we feel it or not.

At one time, humanity did have that kind of peace. God created man and woman to live in that peace with Him and with each other. Into that serene world of total well-being of body, soul, and spirit, sin came crashing in like a boulder through a plate glass window. Sin is so insidious because it is not merely a series of wrong or bad actions, but it is a condition in which we find ourselves which disrupts that peace which God intended for us to have. Sin destroyed the peace that existed between God and people. The destruction of that peace between Creator and creatures also destroyed the peace among creatures. And while we may long for that total well-being again, all our efforts to repair that peace by merely getting rid of sinful actions or trying to do better is as futile as trying to repair that plate glass window smashed by a boulder. At best, any peace that humanity tries to establish will be a temporary lack of conflict or a short-lasting feeling.

Since we are not able to rid ourselves of the conflict that prevents peace and we are not able to establish the peace which we seek, we must either resign ourselves to never having peace or to find it in a different source. Ironically, the source of true peace is the result of this current season which causes such stress, conflict, and lack of peace for so many people – the birth of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

As we heard in the Gospel reading on Christmas Eve, the angels announced “peace on earth” at the birth of Jesus. It was not this particular incident which brought forth peace. However, the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem set in motion a series of events which would bring true and lasting peace to earth.

The Son of God took on human flesh so that He might undo all which we and the rest of humanity had done to destroy peace with God and peace among ourselves and to do all that was necessary to reestablish peace once again. His Baptism established Him as our substitute. He was tempted by Satan, as we have, but rejected those temptations because we did not. He perfectly obeyed the Law of God because we had so often violated it. He underwent the punishment for sin and endured the wrath of God because this was the sentence for our sin. All that was required of us which we failed to do, Jesus did for us. All that we deserved to experience because of our sin – the wrath of God, death, and hell – He experienced in our place.

On that Christmas Eve, the process of establishing peace was inaugurated. The establishment of peace culminated on a cross thirty three years later when Jesus proclaimed, “It is finished!” By His death, Jesus fulfilled all that was required of humanity and forgave all that had been done by humanity. God the Father stamped his approval on Jesus’ ministry by raising Him from the dead on Easter morning. In the life and death of Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, that is, making peace with us.

Another misconception about peace (besides the idea that peace is only the lack of something and that it is but a feeling) is that, if peace does exist, it only exists far off in the future. At worst, people despair over the impossibility of ever experiencing true peace. At best, people resign themselves to a peace only available when you die (or at the point of death). People die in peace, are buried in peace, and rest in peace.

This leads to a possible misunderstanding of the very familiar story which we have in our Gospel reading for today. It is the story of a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout which meant he trusted in the promises of God and lived according to the promises of God. It was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.

When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple in order to fulfill the law of Moses, Simeon came up to the young couple, took Jesus in his arms, and said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.”

Many assume that Simeon was an old man. However, the text never states it or implies it. It is assumed because he spoke of “departing in peace” which many people take to mean “die”. Again, the text never states this or implies it. What the text does say is that he is ready to die because he is at peace with God because of the coming

of the Lord salvation, namely, this baby Jesus. Death could happen the next day or fifty years later.

Simeon is in a state of perfect well-being (peace) because of the Savior, Jesus Christ, whom he held in his arms. In other words, Simeon was experiencing perfect peace whether all of his problems suddenly dried up or he lived the problem filled life; whether he dropped over dead that day when he left the Temple or lived for fifty more years; whether he felt at peace or not.

You don't have to search for peace, strive to feel at peace, or despair at the lack of peace as you read the newspaper and watch the news. You have peace already, right now, and always. The Word of God says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

You did not cause that peace to be nor did you find that peace. As with Simeon who was led by the Holy Spirit to know the promises of God's salvation when he went to the Temple and thus to know peace, so you have been led by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God to know the promises of God's salvation when you come to God's House here and to know peace, as well. Simeon believed in the future work of the Baby whom he held in his arms to earn forgiveness and salvation for him. He was, therefore, at peace. We, too, believe in the past work of the Baby who grew up to live in our place, die in our place, and rise from the dead in our place. We are, therefore, at peace.

This is not a peace which is not only a lack of bad things or a fleeting feeling. This is peace which is a perfect state of being in body, soul, and spirit. This is peace which is yours regardless of the circumstances in your life or whether you feel at peace or not. This is peace with God which is yours all of the time.

Like Simeon, you and I are in a constant state of readiness. Simeon was ready to depart – whether it was the Temple or this planet – because he was at peace. He had seen the Lord's salvation which he prepared for all peoples. That was enough. Salvation through Jesus Christ and peace with God was all that Simeon cared about and all that he needed.

In the same way, you and I are ready to depart this sanctuary or our lives because we have seen the Lord's salvation and are at peace with Him. We never need to be afraid or ill at ease because of the unsettling things occurring in our lives or because we don't feel peace. We have seen the Lord salvation which He has prepared for us. That is enough. Salvation through Jesus Christ and peace with God is all we care about or need.

The words of Simeon may be familiar to many of us and not only because of our familiarity with the story. They form a part of the closing Canticle in Divine Service called the Nunc Dimittis. We sing them at the close of the service to remind us of what we have just done and to give us hope as we leave this sanctuary. We have seen God's salvation for us in the Word of God as it has been read and preached. We are at peace with God and with each other. We are ready in every way to leave church and go to our homes. We are ready in every way to leave this earth and go to our home in heaven. Finally... peace! Amen.