

“Peace Be With You”

May the grace and peace of almighty God be with you.

Prior to beginning my internship year at Zion, I embarked upon a journey to Israel through Martin Luther University College. It was wonderful to experience a different culture, to see some of the historical biblical sites, and to walk many of the same steps that Jesus is reported to have walked. It was a tremendous learning opportunity that helped me gain a better understanding of the geographical and archaeological context of the bible, but it was also challenging as we navigated the historical uncertainty of many geographical sites. I also had not anticipated the number of tourists who, like us, would be visiting many of these same sites. My heart was filled with joy to see so many people interested in historical accounts of Jesus, but my mind and physical presence were overwhelmed by the crowds. There were hundreds of tour buses filled with people who crowded into every cave, landmark, and historic building. On multiple occasions, I found myself feeling claustrophobic and trapped in the depths of underground caves because of the mass crowds who shoved their way in behind me. Needless to say, the majority of these historic sites would not meet North American maximum capacity standards; the fire marshal would not be impressed.

Despite all of this, what I remember most about the Holy Land is all of the walls, security fencing, and soldiers who were tasked with protecting and dividing the city. Through conversations and presentations, we learned that many Israeli and Palestinian people live in fear of themselves, each other, and the rest of the world. The country and its inhabitants are divided by walls that are both apparent and invisible. People hide in fear of their neighbor and for many, the focus is on preservation of life. But what seemed perhaps more sad were the friends and families who were forcefully divided by the same walls that were built to protect them against the culmination of fear, uncertainty, and war that has existed for centuries. Just as walls shelter and protect – they also divide.

In today' gospel according to John, we catch a glimpse of the disciples also hiding in fear behind the walls of their meeting place. Their fear of the Jews, as John puts it, is understandable in light of the recent persecution of Christ, their beloved leader and friend. For just as Christ was convicted of being the King of the Jews, interpreted as a political threat against Rome, so too his followers and disciples might also be considered a threat. Just as Christ died at the hands of those he came to save, so too the disciples might also be handed over by the Jewish people and charged for challenging the socio-political order of Jewish and Roman society.

In addition to this, we might also recall that in Matthew's passion narrative, Pilate arranges for a soldier to guard the tomb of Jesus to keep people, namely the disciples, from stealing Christ's body. Pilate is afraid that they might take the body and then falsely proclaim that Christ is risen from the dead. So, when Mary Magdalene, in the previous section of this chapter, informs the disciples that she has seen the risen Christ, they might be afraid that Jewish authorities will accuse them of stealing the body. The disciples' perhaps feared punishment or that their lives would be taken at the hands of their own

people, the Jews. But, many of the disciples themselves come from a Jewish heritage, and so what John means by “the Jews” is not the bloodline of Abraham, but people like the Sadducees and Pharisee’s who opposed Jesus and the message that he came to share.

Trapped in the context of a world that is divided by religious and political beliefs, the gospel narrative of John catches a glimpse of the disciples as they hide behind the security of walls and a locked door, only to have their fear and uncertainty interrupted by Jesus who appears in their midst with a message of peace. “Eirēnē” he proclaims in Greek, which translates to mean “Peace be with you.” And then, a week later, the disciples still appear to be fearful and uncertain, because they are again hiding behind walls and a closed door when Jesus once more appears and proclaims: eirēnē – “Peace be with you.”

Amidst fear, uncertainty, confusion, and of course the doubt that is so famously seen in the disciple Thomas, Christ brings a message and promise of peace. This same message is proclaimed in Luke’s account of Christ’s birth narrative: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” (Luke 2:14).

Christ brings the hope of peace amidst even the most trying and uncertain circumstances. Christ walks past the walls of bitterness, fear, doubt, and insecurity to make known both his presence and the peace that he brings. But it isn’t just a message of peace that Christ provides, it’s a reality. A reality that is seen in each and every humble act of service that, as Martin Luther suggests: “Christ did for us and for our sake.”¹ Christ both proclaimed and enacted the hope that is given in and through God’s “eirēnē” – God’s peace.

In today’s text, as Christ begins preparing for his ascension into heaven, he invites the disciples to follow in his example of sharing the message of hope and of peace that he was born to proclaim. Christ states that: “Just as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Christ is inviting his followers to carry on the work that he has begun; the work of humble service rooted in love for God and for one another. The work that steps beyond borders and walls to bring hope and peace to situations and circumstances that otherwise might appear to be hopeless. Or as Martin Luther puts it:

“Just as Christ did not seek his own benefit and advantage, so we should seek our neighbor’s benefit and advantage. The works done for our neighbor show that we have faith in God and love for our neighbor. However, we become neither righteous nor saved by them.”²

Christ is calling his disciples beyond the walls of their comfort zone. Christ calls his followers to step beyond the walls that divide them from the rest of the world so that they might share God’s love, through action, with all people. That same Christ speaks to us with both a challenge and a promise. We live in a world that is more interconnected than it has ever been – yet it often feels so disconnected. In Israel there are physical walls and borders that are clearly labeled, but they are not the only group of people or country that struggle with division caused by unsanctioned disconnection. Our lives are filled

¹Christopher Boyd Brown (editor), *Luther’s Works Volume 69: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 17-20*, (Saint Louis, IL: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 329.

²Ibid.

with boarders and walls; some of which serve a tremendous purpose for safety and other practical means, but there are other types of walls that are meant to unjustly keep people out, and at the same time, there are walls that often trap us within our own selves. Walls of bitterness, hatred, and unforgiveness, walls of racism, discrimination, and self-righteousness, walls of heartache, injustice, sickness, brokenness, disparity, and pain. Walls that we might create within ourselves and walls that might be unfairly created for us.

But no matter the circumstance, the promise of Christ depicted in today's gospel narrative is that there are no walls or boundaries that Christ cannot walk through. There are no circumstances in which God is not present. For just as the confirmation kids learned this week in class, God is omnipresent – meaning that God is everywhere. The peace of God, through Christ, is amidst the walls of fear, uncertainty, stubbornness, and doubt of the disciples in John's gospel. And that same presence of peace is present with us, as the children of God, when we feel trapped by the circumstantial walls of this life. The spirit of Christ is present amidst our circumstances and whispers to us that same message of "eirēnē" – Peace, and in Christ's presence of peace, there is rest and strength for the weary, help for the brokenhearted, and hope of life eternal with Christ.

But, just as we might find hope and comfort amidst this text, we might also find a challenge. A challenge to share God's love and peace with those who stand outside of these walls. With people who are on the fringes of society, with people who are lonely, hungry, and afraid. With people who are in need of the hope and peace that only comes through Christ Jesus our Lord. For the hope of peace that comes in and through the gift of Jesus Christ is ours to freely share. God's love steps beyond the boundaries of division, insecurity, and fear to bring hope, peace, and the promise of life eternal where the problematic walls of this life will be replaced with understanding, love, and compassion. Amen.