

“Give God’s Peace a Chance”

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through out Lord Jesus Christ ...”

“All we are saying is give peace a chance.”

The words of this 50-year-old song by John Lennon may appear to be simplistic and even naïve, but in the context of the Vietnam War and conflicts around the world they offer an alternative: instead of solving problems through warfare, why not give the alternative a try? In a world where *“everybody’s talking about ministers, sinisters, banisters and canisters ... revolution, evolution, regulation, integrations, meditations, United Nations, congratulations,”* the Beatle great suggests that there might be another approach: *“give peace a chance.”*

Living in peace has sadly been more of a dream than a reality throughout much of human history, which is often defined by wars and conflicts (we speak of the latter part of the 20th Century as the “post-war era”). When peace does exist, it is often a mere cessation of armed conflict, which tension and uncertainty lurking below the surface. Walls that divided warring people are often identified as “peacekeeping barriers,” and nations have stockpiled armaments in order to maintain a tenuous “peace” that only exists because of the threat of “mutually-assured destruction.” We may yearn for a time in which governments “give peace a chance,” but far too often peace is short-lived or only exists as an interval between conflicts.

The entire New Testament was written at a time when people were living under the occupation and oppression of the Roman Empire. Augustus Caesar had established the *Pax Romana*, the “peace of Rome,” a powerful imperial myth maintained by his successors. This period of relative peace and stability across the Empire lasted over 200 years and was meant to guarantee law, order, and stability, even if this meant separating the Empire from the rest of the world and defending, or even expanding, its borders through military intervention and conquest. The “peace” of the Romans was enforced through fear, intimidation, and execution, with crucifixion being one of their chief means of maintaining their control over anyone who might threaten their reign of “peace.”

In his letter to the churches at the heart of the Empire, Paul reveals to his Roman audience a different justice, a different peace, in virtue of a different Lord and a different God. The successors of Caesar Augustus enjoyed among their titles “Lord” and “Savior” and were worshipped as gods; but Paul writes that it is the God of Abraham, the world’s creator, who has now established a different kind of peace *“through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1). This peace was established when God took the Romans’ chief tool of fear and persecution, the cross, and transformed it into the means through which God’s people were reconciled to God through the crucified Christ. It is through the Cross of Christ that God’s people are *“now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”* (Romans 3:24-25). The result of this sacrifice of our true Lord and Savior is that we are *“justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”* (3:28); Lutheran Christians believe and teach that people *“cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins.”* (Augsburg Confession, Article IV).

- “Through Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen, a new situation is created. Christ becomes our Lord in place of the powers of wrath. He is ‘a Lord of life, righteousness, and of all good and blessedness.’ Through his work we become his own and are so ruled by him that he gives us a share in his life in ‘righteousness, innocence, and blessedness’ – that is his lordship.” – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

As the true Lordship of Christ has taken the place of the false lordship of the Roman Emperors, so has a new peace overtaken the false peace of the Empire: *“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (5:1). “Therefore” marks a turning point in Paul’s message of God’s plan of reconciling humanity with God and with one another; *“in a world hungry for peace, justice, love, and reconciliation, the apostle Paul radically removes human initiatives as the prerogative of salvation and, instead, faith becomes the only avenue through which human beings can have a relationship with God and with one another.”* (Israel Kamudzandu). The peace of which Paul speaks is the peace that Jesus offers his disciples in his Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* (John 14:27). In the Old Testament, “peace” (*shalom*) was the conventional leave-taking address (*“The Eli answered, ‘Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.’”* – 1 Samuel 1:17), but Jesus is not simply saying farewell to his disciples with this promise of peace. In the context of Jesus’ impending death, *“peace I leave with you”* takes on the meaning of a bequest, something that is willed to one’s survivors. The “peace” (*Eirene*) that Jesus offers is not the world’s peace; it is neither the false promise of security (*“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.”* – Jeremiah 6:14) nor the mere absence of conflict. The peace that Jesus gives is *his* peace, a peace that derives from the heart of Jesus’ life. The peace of Jesus is *“the all-embracing sphere of his life, his love, [and] his joy.”* (Rudolf Schnackenberg).

- “It is a very comforting and pleasing final word that he leaves them. It does not consist of cities and castles or of silver and gold; it is peace, the greatest treasure in heaven and on earth. He does not want his disciples to be fearful and mournful; he wants them to have true, beautiful, and longed-for peace of heart.” – Martin Luther.

This *“peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* is a peace that Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians as one *“which surpasses all understanding [and] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:7). God’s peace far surpasses any human understanding of peace because the ways of God are greater than the ways of humanity:

- “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – Isaiah 55:8-9.

It is through this peace that God has given us in Jesus Christ that we have obtained *“access to this grace in which we stand.”* (5:2). “Grace” (*charis*) here is shorthand for the sphere of God’s continuing love. The result of our past justification and the present status of grace is the future hope: *“we boast in our hope in sharing the glory of God.”* What could not be attained through the Law – a secure confidence in being God’s people – is on offer through Jesus Christ.

- “It is this peace, embracing alike each person and the whole community, that reveals to the wider world the existence and nature of the alternative empire, set up through the true Lord, the Messiah.” – N.T. Wright.

The peace of God that is ours through the blessed hope which is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ is a peace that abides even in the midst of suffering, of which those who are in Christ are not excluded. The Apostle Peter encourages the readers of his first letter that they should *“not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you, to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”* (1 Peter 4:12), for those who followed Christ would share in his suffering (*“the cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized”* – Mark 10:39), but suffering for those who follow Jesus is to be understood as part of a larger story that again ends in hope. In the ancient world, suffering was often interpreted as a sign of God’s displeasure (*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* – Psalm 22:1), but Christians may “boast in our sufferings” for we are sharing in Christ’s sufferings (*“But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”* – 1 Peter 4:13). As the sufferings of Christ were so that we may have *“forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation”* (Small Catechism), so will all that we may suffer for the sake of Christ not defeat us but result in *“endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (5:3-5).

- *“Whatever capacity the church of Jesus Christ has for being a community of suffering, where the very sharing of the burden can constitute the beginning of the healing process, is a capacity which it is always itself receiving from beyond its own possibilities. It is a case of the comforted comforting, the healed healing, the forgiven showing mercy.”* – Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*.

Living in the confidence that the peace of God abides with us and strengthens us so that whatever sufferings we endure in the name of Christ will be transformed into blessings by our Lord who transformed the Cross from an instrument of oppression to the means of our liberation gives us hope to face even the most daunting of crises, including the current COVID-19 pandemic that is rapidly growing here at home and around the world. While our life as a church may change somewhat as events unfold over the coming weeks, what will not change is God’s call for us to serve boldly in the name of the one who overcame the power of death so that we might live in the hope of everlasting life. Our history teaches us lessons as to how we as Lutheran Christians might respond to the current crisis: in 1527, the bubonic plague which had killed 40% of the population of Europe in the 14th Century returned to Wittenberg, Germany. While most of the university faculty and student relocated to nearby Schlieben, Martin Luther and his colleague Johannes Bugenhagen chose to stay in Wittenberg and minister to its sick and frightened residents. In order to guide Christians as to what was a safe and faithful response to the plague, Luther wrote a fourteen-page pamphlet entitled *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, in which he emphasized the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of government to protect and provide services for its citizens, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine, and common sense:

- *“God has created medicines and has provided us with intelligence to guard and take care of the body ... Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence.”*

Luther’s words provide us with sound guidance as to how we are to respond to the crisis that is in our midst. It may necessitate some changes in our worship life, in our congregational gatherings, and in our pastoral ministries. Some beloved traditions and time-honored practices may have to temporarily be suspended. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America offers sound

guidance to Lutherans across North America as to how we might live faithfully during this time of uncertainty and fear:

- “We are living in the time of coronavirus. We are also living in the time of social media and constant, relentless news coverage. Many of our people have the same concerns as those in Luther’s day. Many of our people are anxious. Luther’s counsel, based on Scripture, is still sound. Respect the disease. Do not take unnecessary risks. Provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the neighbor. Make use of medical aid. Care for one another, especially the most vulnerable ... Luther also reminded his people and us that we should trust God’s faithfulness and promises, particularly the promise of eternal life. Paul writes, ‘If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.’ (Romans 14:8).”

In the midst of the uncertainty and fear of our times, the peace of God blesses us with comfort, reassurance, and confidence that the peace of God which passes all understanding, the peace that is rooted in the Gospel of our crucified and risen Lord, will keep us, guard us, protect us, and abide with us in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is a peace that gives us confidence even in the midst of suffering, because we share in the sufferings of Christ who transformed that we sought to destroy us into that which gives us everlasting life, a hope that never disappoints because it is the hope that is rooted in the blessed assurance that nothing – not even COVID-19 – can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Give God’s peace a chance!

Amen.