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PEACE THAT PASSES UNDERSTANDING Michael B. Beough
John 14:25-27; Philippians 4:4-7 February 17, 2008
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What is it about our experience with Jesus Christ that our communities cannot live without?

As a congregation, we have determined that our answer to that question is "Peace. Purpose. Promise." This is our Core Message. This is what we experience in Jesus Christ, and what we believe God wants others to experience. We believe this is a message that speaks to the needs of many people in our communities.

For the sake of this sermon series, I am calling this Core Message "Living water for times such as these". I keep going back to the story of the woman at the well in John's gospel. Jesus gives her living water so that she might never thirst again. I might picture our Core Message this way: Three streams joining as one and feeding the roots of a tree that grows and bears much fruit. The streams flow from Jesus, and we are the trees fed by them.

This morning I want to focus on one of the streams - "peace". What do we mean when we say "peace" is a part of our Core Message? Why should that matter to anyone? What kind of peace are we talking about?

Biblical vision of peace

Permit me to talk a moment about the Biblical vision of peace because this is our context. Beginning with the Old Testament prophets, God left no doubt that the divine purpose was to bring peace on earth.

*Micah 4: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines
and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.*

In Isa 9:6, it says that the Messiah who was to come would be called "Prince of Peace".

In Psalm 24: 14, God calls on us to *Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.*

Jesus continued this call to peacemaking. In Matthew 5, he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Others like the Apostles Paul and John lived in full anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of peace. Jesus symbolized this Kingdom as a great banquet feast where all of God's children sit down together and enjoy the blessings prepared for them by God.

Biblically, peace means living together in harmony.

- It means every person having his or her fundamental needs met. I
- It means a just society where everyone rallies around to care for the poor, the widows, and the orphans. No one is to be left out of the community. I
- It means the absence of conflict. I
- It means learning peacemaking strategies for resolving conflict. I

Now, I know what some of you are thinking because we have all thought it. This is an impossible dream. Didn't Jesus say there will always be wars and rumors of wars? There will always be conflict? Depends on what you mean by "always". But then the Psalmist was either on something or knew what he was talking about when he wrote:

*8 Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire. (Psalm 46)*

The divine purpose is to bring peace on earth. But here is something else the Bible tells us. **This peace is possible only when are living in peace with God.** Jesus' message was not just about stopping wars. It was about peace with God that we all long for and may not even realize we need and the absence of which feeds conflict and war. In John 14, Jesus says it is a peace unlike what the world gives. In Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul says it is the peace that passes all understanding, in other words, a peace that we cannot manufacture for ourselves.

Jesus knows that until we experience that kind of peace, we don't have much chance of living together in harmony in our homes and relationships or of stopping wars. Jesus came to give us that kind of peace.

The price of false peace

You see, what concerns me about the communities we live in is the false sense of peace and security. It is the myth that if you can afford to live in a place like Southlake, you've got it made. People on the outside see Southlake as a kind of Eden. What they don't realize is that we have all the same fears and worries and insecurities that everyone else does - in spite of all the money here and the great schools and the "sign enforcer" who makes sure our aesthetic sense is not insulted as we drive up and down Southlake Boulevard!

We have the best of everything. But we still are not free from fear and worry. Just read the headlines concerning the fears that we may be in a recession! When the sky falls, we crumble just like everybody else.

I saw this in South Texas where I served as a pastor in the 1980's. In 1980, it was an oil drilling town awash in money. The banks couldn't loan the money fast enough to get more drilling rigs in the oil fields. Drilling company owners and executives started building big houses and buying airplanes. It was a high time and hardly anyone gave any thought to what might happen if the price of oil started dropping. But by 1982, the banks who had loaned all the money for the oil rigs now had them parked in their parking lots like the carcasses of dinosaurs no one wanted. Houses stopped in mid-construction. At least one oil executive took his own life.

I have seen it personal and up close when the sky falls on someone who has lived with a false sense of peace and security. I have seen what it can do to us.

I do not mean to be an alarmist, but a realist. Someone said why should peace be our Core Message when everyone seems pretty peaceful around here. Well, not everyone. Not in every home. And no one all the time. And a lot of us have nothing but a false peace and sense of security that we work like the devil to maintain.

Confidence and trust in God

The root of Biblical peace - a peace that is true and lasting and creates positive energy for resolving conflicts - is a radical confidence and trust in God. In Jeremiah 26:3, the prophet says to God, *Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace--in peace because they trust in you.*

In the past week, I asked several of you what peace is for you. And this is what you told me. There is a peace in knowing that God is in control,

no matter what happens, no matter how much our security is threatened. You see, when we can truly believe that, it releases us from fear and worry about ourselves to become peacemakers in the Biblical sense. Do you want peace in your home? In your marriage? In your heart? The foundation on which to build peace is our confidence and trust in God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. I like the way William Barclay says it in his commentary on Philippians

When we pray, we must always remember three things. We must remember the love of God, which ever desires only what is best for us. We must remember the wisdom of God, which alone knows what is best for us. We must remember the power of God, which alone can bring to pass that which is best for us. He who prays with a perfect trust in the love, wisdom and power of God will find God's peace.

The hymn we sang earlier, *It Is Well with My Soul*, is a testimony to the way in which the peace of Christ makes a difference in our lives.

This hymn was penned by Horatio G. Spafford in 1873 aboard a ship over the spot in mid ocean where his four little daughters drowned in an earlier shipping accident. He was on his way to England to catch up with his wife Anna who had survived the accident and sent him a telegram that began, "Saved alone. What shall I do?"

Anna was going to England with their daughters in hopes of restoring her health after suffering other tragedies in their life. In 1870, their one son died of scarlet fever. In 1871, the great Chicago fire destroyed most of the city and with it Spafford's law and real estate business.

We must not imagine that when he wrote the hymn he was sanguine about the deaths of his daughters or simply accepting of their fate. This man grieved as any father would, but in the midst of his grief he remembered the love, wisdom, and power of God, and in that sense it was well with his soul. It was this confidence in God that enable him to get on with his life in a most remarkable way, but in that moment of writing we can imagine a deeper kind of peace, an assurance that God had not forgotten him nor abandoned his daughters, the peace in knowing that someday faith would be sight and the clouds would be rolled back.

Spafford did get on with his life. He and Anna returned to Chicago. They had three more children, one of whom died of a disease. Then in 1881, they and a group of friends moved to Jerusalem where they thought they might start over, a kind of spiritual pilgrimage. They bought a villa built by a Turkish pasha. Four months after moving in, Jews from Arab lands began returning to Jerusalem. The Spaffords opened their villa as sanctuary for many of these Jewish families to help them resettle. Over the years, the

Spaffords gave sanctuary to many people, regardless of their nationality or religion or need. The villa became a symbol of peace in a land of historic rivalry and division. Spafford died in 1888 in Jerusalem, but his project continued long past his days and became a stopping place for some of the most powerful and famous people in the world.

We must not immortalize Spafford. He was neither perfect nor a saint, but his hymn continues to inspire Christians all over the world to trust in God who gives the peace that passes understanding.

Our message

Let me ask you this morning. Is it well with your soul?

Our message is that Jesus gives us his peace, different from the kind of peace the world gives us.

I thank God daily for Jesus Christ. He truly is my peace. When I am afraid, I go to him. When I worry, I turn it over to him. I know that when I trust in Him I am at my best in serving Him. He gives us the tools and courage to overcome the fear and worry that dog our days so that we can rise in freedom to become life-breathing agents of the Kingdom of God on earth. So that we might live together in peace.

In the prophecy of Zechariah, God commands us to "love truth and peace."

May the peace of Christ be with you.