

## **Easter 6C**

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

May 9, 2010

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Acts 16:9—15   Psalm 67   Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5   ***John 14:23—29***

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“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

It has been said that we pastors sometimes preach the word that we most need to hear. I think this is definitely the case for me today. When I look at the world around me today, I see anything but peace. The news is filled with all sorts of bad news. Just this month we've had an attempted terrorist bombing in Times Square, yet another stock market crash, the oil leak on the Gulf continues to worsen, and violence has broken out at demonstrations against Arizona's new illegal immigration enforcement law. I see anything BUT peace in our world.

The news hasn't seemed any better on our local scene, either. Several people I know are struggling with serious illnesses. Friends continue to struggle with unemployment. Other friends are facing the imminent deployment of loved ones to Iraq and Afghanistan. And, I've presided at two funerals in the past ten days. Things are looking pretty bleak.

Today's Gospel reading from John is part of Jesus farewell to his disciples. The first part of this discourse is a favorite reading at funerals. We hear the words of Jesus: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Jesus goes on to explain that he is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us. These are just the words of comfort we all need to hear in times of crisis – our Lord assuring us that because of his abiding presence, we should not be troubled.

And yet, I am troubled. I'm deeply troubled over the continuing unrest in the world, unrest which leads to fear and insecurity within our own borders. I'm troubled at the increasing incivility of our public discourse with each other. I'm troubled that people in our society seem to be increasingly incapable of discussing ideas rationally, thoughtfully, and respectfully, and instead stoop to name-calling and demonizing the other.

At times like these, "peace" seems like a very illusive concept to me. I feel anything BUT peaceful.

But Jesus says, "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."

Despite the fact that I don't *feel* peace in my life right now, these words of Jesus *are* of comfort to me. I thank God that the peace of Jesus is more than just whatever I might feel in the moment. Feelings are fleeting. But today Jesus promises to us to remain among us in the promised Holy Spirit. How I feel does not determine whether or not God is with me. Feeling that God is near, or far, does not determine the reality of God's presence with me. The promise of Jesus to remain among us determines the reality of God's promise. Even though I may not *feel* peaceful does not mean that God's presence has withdrawn. Jesus promises that he will always be with us.

In these times of spiritual drought, it is important, then, to first remember Jesus promise to always be with us. His continuing presence is not only in the elements we encounter here on Sunday morning: bread and wine, water and word. His continuing presence among us also comes through the promised Holy Spirit. This Advocate is what reminds us, during times of unrest and turmoil, of Jesus' words of promise. And these words of promise are intended to give us hope.

And yet, by its very nature, it's often hard for us to envision the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a zephyr, a sprite. It is not a concrete presence. It is here, there, and everywhere. This ephemeral nature of the Holy Spirit sometimes makes it hard for us to relate to the third person of the Trinity. Sometimes, it, too, is reduced to nothing more than a feeling – whether or not we *feel* the presence of God. One author provides one possible illustration of the Advocate. He says:

When my wife puts her hand on the doorknob, her coat over her arm, my children look up from what they are doing to ask: “Who will take care of us?” and she gives them the name of one of their regular babysitters. All of them are capable, and my children enjoy the attention, but if my wife gives them one name – “Brittain” – my children leap up from what they are doing and rejoice. Brittain reads to them, romps with them, acts out plays and makes chocolate chip cookies; she nurtures their young lives like a loving parent, and as long as she is with them they are not afraid.

I don't know that the Holy Spirit has ever been compared to a babysitter. But if you can imagine Jesus as a mother, then it may not be so hard to imagine the Spirit in this other role, as one who cares for the church in the interim between Jesus' departure and return, as one who comforts, teaches, reminds and, yes, sometimes even romps with the sons and daughters of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Somerville, “Who Will Take Care of Us?” in *The Christian Century*, May 6, 1998, p. 471.

These are just the words of reminder that I need during my times of spiritual drought, when all I feel is the absence of peace. I need to be reminded that not only does the Holy Spirit continue to abide among us, comforting and teaching, but that the presence of God might even be romping among us!

Having been dwelling on these texts all week, I was reminded to be on the look-out for signs of God's continuing presence among us. I saw several in just the past couple of days that I spent at this year's Synod assembly. I saw signs that the people of this synod are inspired and moved to bring the deep *shalom* of God to our hurting world.

*Shalom* envisions a world characterized by peace, justice, and celebration. *Shalom*, the overarching vision of the future, means “peace,” but not merely peace as the cessation of hostilities. Instead, *shalom* envisions the full prosperity of a people of God living under the covenant of God's demanding care and compassion... In the prophetic vision, peace such as this comes hand in hand with justice. Without justice, there can be no real peace, and without peace, no real justice. Indeed, only in a social world full of peace grounded in justice can there come the full expression of joy and celebration.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Gruder (editor), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 90-1.

The New Jersey Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is actively engaged in a great number of ministries which seek to bring justice, peace, and the abiding shalom of God into our hurting world. The ministry that I learned about which was most striking to me is this synod's on-going commitment to the children of Bosnia. For ten years, every summer, a team of youth workers have traveled to Bosnia on their International Servant Trip.

This year [the group] will host 14 Friendship Camps throughout Bosnia. These camps are for children ages 10-13 (and anyone else who shows up!), and are intended to help bring Healing, Hope & Peace, into their lives and their communities. Each camp has anywhere from 60-350+ students, with 10-20 teachers present. [They] hope to serve over 2,300 children this summer.

[The] Friendship Camps will focus on teamwork, the strength found in a diverse group of people working together, and on the fun of tackling a shared challenge. [They] use music and drama exercises, conflict resolution and diversity training. [Team members will] spend [their days] with the children playing together, singing together, sharing stories, creating art, and eating and laughing together. [They'll] give the children, the teachers in attendance that day, and the schools some gifts – including the gift of [their] time and love.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *New Jersey Synod ELCA Bosnia International Servant Trip 2010*, [http://www.njsynod.org/index.php?id=138&itemid=96&option=com\\_content&task=view](http://www.njsynod.org/index.php?id=138&itemid=96&option=com_content&task=view), accessed 5/8/10.

This group of youth workers, with the help of an internationally-recognized expert in conflict resolution, are seeking to build bridges between previously warring factions in Bosnia. They are attempting to teach the children of these factions a “more excellent way” – the way of love, tolerance, and acceptance. From what we heard about this ministry, it sounds like they have been remarkably successful in bringing some of the shalom of God into a previously war-torn region.

The shalom of God continues to break forth in our world. It breaks forth in the Spirit-inspired actions of those who support and conduct important missions like the Bosnia International Servant trip. There is lots of good news to be found in our world; sometimes we just have to push beyond the glut of bad news to find it. And while we wait with eager longing for the day that the shalom of God will not only reign supreme but will cover all the earth, we continue to be comforted by the presence of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, God's promise of the abiding presence of peace among us.

Amen.

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