

This morning I want us to do a little thought experiment just for fun. What I am asking you to do is to clear your mind. Now, think only about your most peaceful place – the place you go when you need some peaceful time. It might be a place in your house or outdoors; it might be a place from the past, a memory of a spot where you experienced complete tranquility. It might even be an imaginary place – perhaps a location from a book or from a photo – but wherever it is, whether in your mind or in the real world – it is that place you go to or think about that you associate with the word “peace.” Do you have it in your mind? Now, answer this question – how many people are there in that place with you?

If I were to ask for a show of hands, I would bet that most, if not all, of us would agree that no one is there in our most peaceful place except for us, alone, and the reason is obvious - as soon as we add more people – even our loved ones – peace has a tendency to be supplanted by something else. That something else might be anxiety, conflict, worry or the always present thought, “What are we doing here? We have things to do.” So it is normal to think about peace as an absence of something rather than the presence of something – and in our case, it is the absence of people.

“Peace” is a slippery concept, isn’t it? The word “peace” has been defined in the history of human culture as the absence of war or conflict, but that doesn’t always work. There has been peace between North and South Korea since 1953 – if we define peace as the absence of war – but to say that the relationship between the two countries has been a peaceful one is obviously not true. Right now the world is holding its breath to see if the Korean peace, enforced by a truce, will be shattered by the enmity between North Korea and the United States. Once again that peace is imposed by an act of absence or withdrawal, as UN sanctions are taking away the economy of the North Korean government, but is that kind

of peace satisfying? Aren't we, like the rest of the world, waiting for the next shoe to drop on the Korean peninsula?

In our own country, we thought that the American civil war ended on April 9, 1865 at the Appomattox courthouse. So why, 152 years later, are some Americans fighting, even killing each other, over monuments to long dead confederate soldiers? As a southerner, I ask why were those monuments created in the first place? I never thought much about them except as a gathering place for pigeons. As of yesterday, there was still a statue of a Confederate soldier on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but all I ever knew about it was what I was told as a freshman – that the statue would fire his rifle anytime a virgin walked by; hence, the name Silent Sam. Silent Sam may be gone tomorrow, but does that mean peace between white supremacists and we who oppose them? So, what does peace really mean, and is it possible?

The prophet Ezekiel did not think that peace was possible, at least in the way that Ancient Israel was declaring the idea of peace. Ezekiel was God's prophet during the exile of Judea, when the best and brightest of Israel were taken into captivity and settled in the enemy land of Babylon. The children of God were in a state of shock – they had always been told by their religious leaders that Yahweh would defend them against any enemy, and that the temple in Jerusalem would stand forever. In the wake of their defeat, the exiled prophets of Israel's religion declared that God would strike vengeance against Babylon and return them immediately to their homeland and the promised peace of Yahweh.

Ezekiel calls out these prophets, labeling them as “jackals among the ruins.” Speaking with the voice of God, Ezekiel proclaims that the evil at the root of Israel's suffering is not

Babylon, but the disobedience of God's people and their corrupt religious leaders, including the very same prophets who are declaring that God will return them to their land in peace. Ezekiel uses the image of a cracked and crumbling wall, painted white by the prophets to hide God's righteous judgment, which will fall upon the false prophets for lying about the prospect of peace and the immediate return of the exiles to their land: "Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace', when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it...I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare; when it falls, you shall perish within it; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

The false prophets were defining God's peace as the absence of war and the end of Israel's exile, but God, speaking through Ezekiel, declares that God's people must add something to their lives if they want true peace. Israel must heed the message of their suffering and repent of their apostasy. Instead of centering their faith upon a crushed and broken temple in the fallen city of Jerusalem, they must build a new and spiritual temple in their hearts, a building not made with hands, but with love for God and for the world.

We hear the fulfillment of Ezekiel's words in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth when he can state with absolute certainty: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens...He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." How could Paul reach this conclusion with such absolute assurance?

We find that answer in the Gospel of John, at a critical moment for Christ's disciples. As they realize that Jesus is reaching the conclusion of his ministry, the disciples are not experiencing the peace that their religion had promised them, a peace directly connected to the coming of God's long-promised Messiah. From the beginning of their journey with Jesus, the Apostles had expected that Jesus would deliver the peace of the temple religion of Jerusalem – a peace tied to a nation under the authority of the new Babylon – the Roman Empire. The temple religion had promised a Messiah of conquest and imperial authority – one who would overthrow the tyranny of Rome, sit on the throne of David, and subject all nations to the will of Jerusalem.

Now, as the Apostles sit at table with their leader, their hearts are filled not with peace, but with great fear and deep anxiety. Jesus had openly attacked the temple, declaring that he would tear it down and rebuild it in three days. In response, the religious and community leaders of Israel had conspired to kill this one who many were proclaiming as Messiah. Jesus had affirmed to his followers that this plot would succeed, but not as the temple leaders expected. Jesus speaks to the dread in their hearts by promising the Messianic gift of a new kind of peace: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?... I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

The Greek word for peace in the time of Christ, *eiréné*, meant “peace” as the absence of war – that’s how Greek culture had historically defined it. But Jesus uses this word in the Aramaic or Hebrew sense – “*salaam*” or “*shalom*,” which is defined not as the absence of conflict, but as the presence of wholeness, fulfillment, and tranquility. *Shalom* is a positive quality that one has in the heart, and Christ tells us that this peace is a gift from God. Jesus identifies that gift as the Holy Spirit, who comes as an enlightening presence to make sense of a suffering and dying Messiah. That is what Paul is saying to the Corinthians when he writes, “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” It is the Holy Spirit that makes *shalom* possible in our hearts, even when we struggle to find *eiréné* in our lives; even when the world offers no such peace, because it can’t.

The movie “*Fat Man and Little Boy*” is the story of the development of the atomic bomb during World War II under the leadership of Robert Oppenheimer. As the scientists begin to realize that “the device” (as they called it) is about to become a reality, they petition Oppenheimer to find a way not to use it, or to use it only as a demonstration rather than in an attack. The project physician, who has seen the preparation for multiple bombs at Oak Ridge, asks Oppenheimer about his lack of response to the petition, then angrily confronts him about the size of the explosion and the horror that they are about to release upon humanity. Oppenheimer responds saying, “I don’t know anything about Oak Ridge, but if you want to ask about what’s happening here, you ask this: will it be big enough; big enough to scare us and make us stop and think. Big enough to stop all war forever. If you want to ask a question, you ask that.”

72 years later, we now know the answer to that question. Nuclear weapons have not made war unthinkable; even the idea of nuclear weapons as a deterrent is hanging by an ever-unraveling thread. Clearly Oppenheimer's explosion was not great enough to make human peace possible – but God is great enough to make peace possible, not through death and destruction, but through the love of Christ and God's spiritual presence in the hearts of God's people. We pray for peace in the world – we work for peace in the world – but we experience peace, and know peace, not because we escape to some place absent of turmoil and trouble, but because wherever we are, we are never alone – God is with us. Augustine wrote this prayer in his book "Confessions": "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." That is where peace is possible – that place inside, where we rest in God's love. May we find that place – for ourselves, and for the restless, searching hearts in this world.