



Peace in Our Time

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 2:8-14

December 6, 2015

There's no avoiding it this week. News about the San Bernardino shootings is everywhere. I don't want to spoil your morning, but I need to process the San Bernardino shootings with you for a moment.

Mass shootings have become epidemic this year. Last week, it was a shooting at a Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado. Earlier in the fall, it was a mass shooting at an Oregon community college. This past summer, it was a shooting at a South Carolina church Bible study. What's going on here?

I scoured every editorial I could find about the shootings this week. Since the common denominator in all these shootings involves guns, it's not surprising that much of the debate centers on whether there should be stricter gun laws. I was also struck by the reluctance of editorialists to speculate on why we have become such a violent culture. Why do we have such an appetite for gun violence in movies and video games? Why aren't more commentators willing to go farther upstream to identify the source of the problem? Maybe it's because the problem is so colossal in scope. The problem, as I see it, lies in the human heart. There is something wrong with us that we can't fix ourselves. Someone has said, "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart."

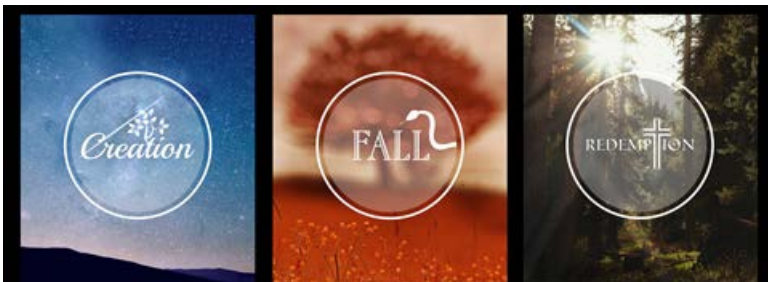
Jesus debated with the religious people of his day about this human problem. The religious establishment, called Pharisees, insisted it was what people chose to do with their lives that made them virtuous or evil. Jesus said the fundamental human problem is farther upstream, located in the human heart. He said, "For out of the heart flow evil thoughts like murder..." (Matthew 15:19).

Today's sermon is about peace. It's daunting to talk about something as cosmic as world peace. Yet, the Bible isn't shy to discuss what makes for real peace.

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. It appears no less than 500 times in the Old Testament. Shalom equates to words like wholeness, well-being and harmony. Peace and salvation are often used interchangeably in Scripture.

The angels sang at Jesus' birth, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Where is this peace that Jesus brings?

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" is a popular Christmas carol. Charles Wesley, who penned this carol in 1739, began with the words, "Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!" I'm interested in the line, "God and sinners reconciled."



We talk often in this church about God's Big Story in Scripture using three words: creation, fall and redemption. First,

creation—we are created for relationship with God. That's why we are made. We spend so much energy debating how God made the world in Genesis that we miss *why*, in fact, God made us. We are made for relationship with God. Since God cannot give us anything beyond Himself, He gives us Himself.

Second, fall—we fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God.

People are now estranged from God on account of human sin. So, it is incumbent either on us to ascend to God or God to condescend our way. This brings us to the third word, redemption—we are redeemed or reconciled back into relationship with God through the cross. Paul writes in Colossians, “God has reconciled all things to himself...by making peace through his blood shed on the cross” (1:20). God initiates this reconciliation by making peace through the blood of the cross.

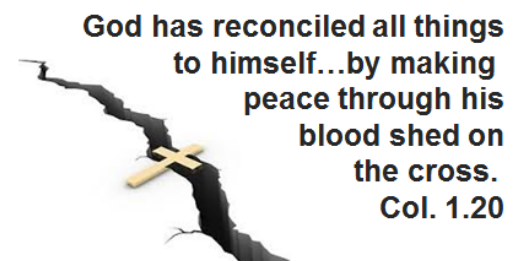
Let’s consider one more passage to underscore how God makes peace with people like us who are estranged by sin. Paul writes in Romans, “Therefore, since we have been justified

through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1). Justification is a fancy word for the salvation Jesus offers people on the cross. We receive God’s gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So, it only begs the question, have you received God’s gracious offer of salvation?

People tell me, especially those who face their own mortality, “I’ve made my peace with God.” When people talk this way, I feel like screaming, “You can’t make peace with God because God is the one who makes peace with us.”

Jesus says to his followers, “Peace, I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Despite all the world has to offer, it cannot give us the peace we are seeking. “I do not give as the world gives.”

I was rocked with the headline that appeared in the New York Daily News this week, “God Isn’t Fixing This.” It was



a thinly veiled attempt to blast politicians who only offer “thoughts and prayers” but are unwilling to propose solutions on gun control. While I appreciate that prayer is never an excuse to sit on our hands and do nothing, I take issue with the headline. God can indeed fix this mess and more if we are willing.

The title for this sermon is drawn from a 1938 remark from British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. He signed a peace accord with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler that stated that England and Germany would never go to war again. When he returned from their meeting, he spoke to the English people by waving the signed accord and announcing proudly, “I believe it is peace in our time. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.”

The peace treaty turned out to be short-lived. Hitler decided it was only a scrap of paper when he invaded Poland a year later. By 1939, England and France had declared war on Germany, which plunged the world into the Second World War.

Jesus’ peace is out of this world for this world. “I do not give as the world gives.”

So, what does this sermon have to do with my life? Three things come to mind.

1. Antidote to Worry



Do not be anxious
...present your
requests to God
...and peace of God
will guard you
Phi. 4.6-7

First, God’s peace in Jesus Christ can be an antidote to worry. The longer I’m in ministry, the more aware I am of how disabling worry is to the life of faith. For any of you afflicted

with worry and anxiety, learn this passage: “Do not be anxious...but in everything by prayer and supplication with

thanksgiving, present your requests to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Second, God’s peace in Jesus Christ can mediate our personal disputes. Tell me you don’t have a dispute with someone in your life? Paul writes in Colossians, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (3:15). The Greek word for rule is a reference to referees and umpires who presided over athletic games that were so popular in Greek culture. Let the peace of Christ referee your disputes. Let Jesus Christ function like an umpire to check your emotions and restrain your anger.

2. Mediate personal disputes

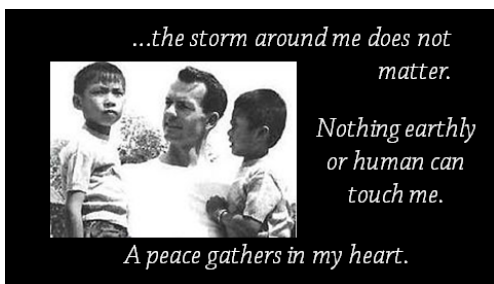
Let PEACE
rule in
your heart



Third, God’s peace in Jesus Christ is not dependent on external circumstances. We live in tenuous times. We have witnessed the rise of ISIS in the last few years, a violent off-shot of the al-Qaeda terrorist group. ISIS rejects peace on matters of principle. CIA director John Brennan speculates that more ISIS attacks are in the pipeline. Yes, we live in tenuous times.

While we may think our predicament is unprecedented, let me take you back to the first Christmas when God became human. The civilized world was dominated in those days by the Roman Empire. For a period of 200 years, it was a time of relative peace called *Pax Romana*— a Latin phrase for Roman Peace. “Peace” is misleading since it was a military imposed peace. Any uprising was brutally suppressed.

It’s possible to have peace when there is war and strife going on all around us. Jesus can provide a peace that passes all human understanding even when life is flying apart at the seams. “He does not give as the world gives.”



Dr. Tom Dooley was a Navy doctor who served in South-east Asia in early 1960s. At the tender age of 34, he was dying of cancer. He typed the following note to Father Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame, while in the hospital for a reoccurrence of melanoma that had attacked his spine, “I’m down, flat on my back...I’ve contrived a way of pumping up the bed so that I can reach my typewriter. Two things prompt me to write this note to you. The first is that whenever my cancer acts up, and it is certainly “acting up” now, I turn inward. Less do I think of my hospitals around the world... and more do I think of one Divine Doctor and my personal fund of grace. It has become definite that the cancer has spread to my lumbar vertebra, accounting for all my back problems over the last two months. I have monstrous phantoms, all men do. And inside and outside the wind blows. But when the time comes, like now, then the storm around me does not matter. Nothing earthly or human can touch me. A peace gathers in my heart. What seems unfathomable, I can fathom. What is unutterable, I can utter. Because I can pray. I can communicate. How do people endure anything if they cannot have God?”

This kind of peace isn’t something the world can offer. Jesus’ peace passes all human understanding. When the storms of life assail us, a peace can gather in our hearts. “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you...Do not let your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.”



I believe it is peace in our time.



**Peace, I leave you,
my peace I give you.
I do not give as the
world gives. Do not
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Mt. 14.27**