

John 20
Judges 6
Psalm 122

“Peace Be with You”

November 22, 2020

What is peace?

Peace is more than just the absence of conflict.
Israel will have no peace until they go to battle!

When you have an enemy who is actively oppressing you,
then the only way to make peace, is to defeat him in battle.

This is why it is utterly futile to tell a battered wife that the solution is to submit to her husband!
That is *not* the way to peace!
Oppressors must be stopped!

The absence of conflict is not *peace* – it is merely “the status quo.”
Peace includes an active sense of God’s powerful presence with his people.

In Judges 6 God calls Gideon to go and smite the Midianites,
rescuing Israel from their enemies.

That’s what peace can look like!
Peace can mean going to war to drive out the oppressors.
Because so long as oppression is allowed to remain –
there is no peace.

Also, notice that the angel of the LORD calls Gideon to start a revolution.
Now Gideon isn’t quite sure who he is talking to.
If a strange man appeared and told you to lead a revolution,
you might be a little slow to do it as well!!

How do I know that you are who you say you are?!
He wanted to see a sign.
So the angel of God gave him a sign–
and consumed the sacrifice with fire from the rock.

When he saw this, Gideon declared,
“Alas, O Lord Yahweh, for now I have seen the angel of Yahweh face to face.”
But God replied, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.”

Then Gideon built an altar there to Yahweh and called it
“Yahweh Shalom”–the LORD is Peace

As long as God is absent from his people, there is no peace.

Peace comes only when God dwells with his people,
when God visits his people bringing judgment against their enemies,
and giving his people rest.

Gideon has seen the angel of the LORD face to face,
and yet God has spoken peace to him.

God has promised to be present with him—
indeed, in 6:34, “The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon.”

The Holy Spirit came upon Gideon to lead the people of God to victory —
and thus to peace.

And just after the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon —
Gideon asks for a sign.

It is tempting to see this as a lack of faith —
wasn't seeing the angel of the LORD enough?
wasn't seeing fire spring up from the rock sufficient?

But God does not appear to be angry with Gideon —
any more than he was bothered by Thomas, when Thomas wanted a sign.

Wavering faith is still faith!

Doubting faith is still faith!

If you come to God with upside down, backwards, inside out faith —
it's still faith!

And our faithful Savior will not turn away any who come to him in faith!

And so we pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

A peace that is not merely a “truce” —
a temporary cessation of hostilities.

True peace only comes through the victory of the Son of God on the cross!

And that's what we sing about in Psalm 122.

This is one of the Songs of Ascents —
the songs that pilgrims would sing on their way to Jerusalem for the feasts.
“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!”

The peace of Jerusalem is found in the victory of God over his enemies.

Only then will there be a lasting peace —
a peace that will flourish and endure.

Sing Psalm 122

Read John 20:19-31

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus says those words to *you*.
John wrote those words for *you*.

Both Jesus and John understood that there would be many who would doubt.
After all, most dead people stay dead.
Many would want a sign – like the sign that Jesus gave to Thomas!

But Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who have not seen and yet have believed.

John is bringing us to the conclusion of his Gospel.
And there are lots of ways in which the end of John's gospel parallels the beginning.

At the end of John, chapter 1, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit.
At the end of John, chapter 20, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist declared that Jesus is the Son of God in 1:34.
John tells us in 20:31 that these things have been written
that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Nathaniel believed in Jesus simply because Jesus said that he saw him under the fig tree
in 1:49, and Jesus told him “you will see greater things than these.”
Thomas believes in Jesus only when he sees the greater thing in 20:28,
and yet Jesus speaks then of the greater blessing
for those who have not seen and yet believe.

And not accidentally, John 1:29-2:1 is designed as a seven-day story.
On the first day John is baptizing at the Jordan;
On the next day—the second—the Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism;
on the next day—the third day—John's disciples follow Jesus;
on the next day—the fourth day—Philip and Nathaniel follow Jesus;
and three days later—the seventh day—Jesus turns the water to wine.
In other words, John's gospel opens with a week of seven days.
For the rest of his gospel, every event occurs
in the context of a sabbath or feast.
And now in John 20 we begin a new week.
The first day of the new creation dawns in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The second half of John 20 has two parts:
Jesus' meeting with the ten disciples on the evening of the first day of the week—
the evening of the resurrection (verses 19-25)
and Jesus' meeting with the eleven (including Thomas) eight days later (verses 26-29)

John structures these two meetings in parallel through his use of the time stamp
(The first day of the week—v19, and after eight days—v26)

and by Jesus' opening words to his disciples both times:
"Peace be with you."

These words echo his promise in 14:27

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

These words had referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit in verse 26:

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,
he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance
all that I have said to you."

Jesus promised that when he left to go to the Father, his peace would remain behind.

Now here in John 20, as Jesus meets with his disciples
for the first time since the resurrection,
everything he says to them has to do with this promise.

The *peace* that the prophets had foretold now comes in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Evening of the First Day: The Forgiveness of Sins and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (v19-23)

¹⁹ *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews,*^[c] *Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."* ²⁰ *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."* ²² *And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

And so when our Lord was raised from the dead on the first day of the week,
he came that evening to meet with his disciples.

They were meeting in secret, with the doors locked—

fearing that they would be the next targets of the Jewish leadership.

Especially since the rulers of the Jews believed that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body,
they anticipated some sort of crackdown.

As in the days of Gideon, their enemies were closing in.

But Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

And like the Angel of the LORD, Jesus showed them a miraculous sign —
a sign far more powerful than any mere miracle.

He showed them his hands and his side.

For this was no phantom or ghost.

How did he make it through the locked doors?

I have no idea!

But he did.

This was the resurrected Messiah.

He had suffered for the sins of the world,
and now he was returning to the Father.
Let me state this emphatically.
This was no “ordinary” resurrection.
That may sound odd.
Resurrection from the dead is hardly “ordinary!”
But Elijah and Elisha had raised the dead.
Jesus raised several people from the dead,
and after him the apostles raised the dead.
But all of those people went back and died later.

Jesus did not.

A century ago the idea of resurrection was mocked by unbelievers
and liberal theology attempted to explain the resurrection away
as a figment of the apostles’ imagination.
But today most unbelievers have no problem with the idea
that perhaps something strange happened—
and perhaps Jesus did rise from the dead.
But so what?
In a postmodern world anything is possible.

When Elijah and Elisha raised the dead, it was remarkable,
but there was nothing earthshaking about it.
Even the raising of Lazarus was just an “ordinary” resurrection.
It was something odd and unusual, but it didn’t change the course of history.
Lazarus doesn’t come out of the grave saying, “Peace be with you!”

But when Jesus meets with his disciples,
he shows them his hands and his side.
These are the wounds that he bore for us.
This resurrection is different from all other resurrections,
because Jesus is Lord.

His resurrection is what inaugurates the new creation.
Because Jesus has been raised from the dead,
therefore all those who hope in him will also be raised!
In that way, the resurrection of Jesus is the great victory of the King
who establishes *peace*.

In the midst of the disciples’ fear and wonder,
he brings joy and peace.

“Peace be with you.”

As he had promised them in John 14, he now gives to them his peace.
“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”
They will be his witnesses—they will do works greater than his—
because they will bring the message of his work to the nations.

When Jesus ascends to the Father,
the kingdom of God consists of a couple hundred faithful disciples.
But through their apostolate—through their preaching—
the kingdom of God will become thousands, and tens of thousands.
And as that preaching has spread to the ends of the earth,
that kingdom today numbers in the millions – maybe billions!

“Peace be with you.”

You may think that the Midianites are coming.
You may think that your enemies are coming for you next.
(And yes, they are!)

But as I equipped Gideon with my Spirit a thousand years ago,
so I am equipping you with my Spirit now.
And so with the commission comes the power to fulfill the commission.
And through his breath, he communicates to them the Holy Spirit.

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

This is not the work of the Spirit in regeneration—
they are already regenerate.

Rather, this is the gift of the Spirit to equip them to proclaim the good news.
They are called as his instruments to bring salvation to his people
and judgment to the nations.
Therefore Jesus says “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven;
if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

As Gideon had been clothed with the Spirit to deliver Israel and destroy Midian,
so also the anointed leaders of Christ’s church are given the Spirit
to forgive the sins of God’s people
and to withhold forgiveness from those who would destroy the church.

It might seem at first as though this spiritual power is pretty flimsy
compared to what Gideon did.

After all, Gideon drove the Midianites out of Israel!
(But when Gideon died, another enemy came and took over!!)

But what does Jesus do?

He conquers Egypt, Assyria, Rome, Ethiopia – and beyond –

without *ever* fighting a battle!

And how does he do it?

Through the apostle's preaching and fellowship, through the breaking of bread,
and through the prayers.

He changes the world through the proclamation of the Gospel!

Or to use the language that John gives us here:

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

This is remarkable.

Jesus here plainly sends the apostles to do two things:

- 1) forgive the sins of his people
- 2) withhold forgiveness from those who seek to destroy his church.

Some people want to flip this around.

They say that what Jesus *really* means

is that the apostles are supposed to forgive those whom God has already forgiven.

But that's *not* what Jesus says.

Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 18 –

"whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask,
it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I among them."

(It's worth noting that Jesus is talking about church discipline.

We sometimes quote the "two or three gathered in my name"
to refer to worship –

but that's *not* what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus is saying that the disciplinary action of the church
is the disciplinary action of Jesus himself.)

The obvious question is: *but what about when the church gets it wrong?!*

Jesus talks about *that* in the book of Revelation.

He warns that a church may cease to be a church –
that he will come and remove its lampstand.

If those who *claim* to act on behalf of Jesus *get it wrong* –
then they will face a severe judgment!

So, for instance, if someone came to MCPC –

claiming to be wrongly excommunicated by another church –
we wouldn't just ignore that judgment –
we would honor it while we investigated the matter.
If the other church was wrong, then we would urge them to rescind their judgment
and if they refused, then we would rescind it.

But you can't just ignore the church!

But Jesus' teaching here is why Christian churches have historically had a declaration of pardon
in the worship service.

Because this is one of the key things that Jesus commands his ministers to do:
forgive the sins of his people!

Of course, *sometimes* we also need to *withhold* forgiveness.

One of my favorite examples was the 4th century bishop, Ambrose of Milan.

He was pastor of the church where the emperor Theodosius attended.
(How would you like to be pastor to the emperor?!)

Well, one day Theodosius heard that some people in Thessalonica had killed his general
(and in those days,
to kill a representative of the Emperor was like killing the Emperor).

So Theodosius ordered reprisals –
which resulted in a general slaughter of about 7,000 Thessalonians.

If one of you ever orders the slaughter of 7,000 people,
I hope that I do as well as Ambrose did!

Ambrose preached a sermon on King David,
where he said that “David sinned – which is common to kings –
but David repented, and therein lies his uniqueness!”
He publicly rebuked Theodosius and refused to let him come to the Eucharist
(the Lord's table).

Theodosius endured eight months of being barred from communion
before he finally humbled himself and repented.

Ambrose insisted that he bear fruits in keeping with repentance –
and so Theodosius promulgated a new law
that every death sentence needed a thirty-day waiting period
(to allow for a cooling-off period,
and permit the voice of reason to be introduced into heated situations!)

2. Eight Days Later: Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Have Believed (v24-29)

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, ^[d] was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So

the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

The second part of our text today then turns to what it means to believe in Jesus.

You see, Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

And when he heard about Jesus' first appearance, he doubted.

"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails,
and place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side,
I will never believe."

But Jesus makes him wait a week.

²⁶ *Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* ²⁷ *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."* ²⁸ *Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"* ²⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

Eight days later—on the first day of the week—Jesus appears to them again.

Again it is on the first day of the week.

Again they are together in a locked room.

Again Jesus gets inside the locked room.

The only difference is that this time, Thomas is with them.

You cannot read about Thomas without thinking back to Gideon.

Judges 6-8 goes on to tell the story of how Gideon broke down the altar of Baal

and became the instrument of God in rescuing Israel from Midian.

But this mighty man of valor is most famous for his insistence that God provide signs.

Gideon twice put out his fleece, asking God for confirmation of his promise.

God, if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground,

then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand.

And then after that happened:

"Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew"

Gideon wanted God to confirm by a sign that he was indeed the appointed deliverer.

He often is chastised for demanding a sign,

but God did not rebuke him.

He was about to go into battle against incredible odds.

There was no way that he could win unless God himself was with him.

In that light, Thomas also becomes a more sympathetic figure.

After all, Jesus had told the ten, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

To do what?

Like Gideon – to start a revolution!
To challenge the Jewish authorities
by preaching the gospel of a crucified and risen Messiah.
To challenge the Roman authorities
by declaring that Jesus is Lord – not Caesar!

Jesus—whom he had watched die by the hand of those Jewish and Roman authorities.
I, for one, have no desire to rebuke Thomas for his doubts.

Like Gideon – he wanted to know – if we’re supposed to start a revolution,
I really want to make sure that this is really Jesus!

But Jesus came to his disciples, and once more says to them “Peace be with you.”
Once more he declares that the Peace of God has come.
As Isaiah had declared in Isaiah 40,
“Tell Jerusalem that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.”
Jesus comes to his people and declares that Peace has come.

And then he turns to Thomas:
“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Thomas’s answer was to confess that Jesus is “my Lord and my God.”
He had seen Lazarus raised from the dead,
but his response then was simply to be impressed with Jesus.
But when he sees the resurrected Christ,
he believes all that Jesus had said concerning himself.
Truly this Jesus is both Lord and God.

Why did John include this section on Thomas?
John understands that many will sit in Thomas’s place.
How can I believe?
I’ve never seen his hands and his side.
How can I know that this is true?
I want to see this for myself!!
When I was in college, I wanted to see signs.
I wanted heaven to open and God to give me a direct message that this was true.
It never happened.

John’s point here in verses 24-29 is that what God did for Gideon and Thomas
is not the normal mode of revelation.
Indeed, Jesus’ response to Thomas is really designed for us.

Jesus speaks not simply for Thomas’s sake, but for those of us at a distance:

*“Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

John’s gospel is written with the assumption that very few people will get the direct, immediate revelation.

Most of us will hear the preaching of the gospel:
the proclamation of the good news of what Jesus has done.

We walk by faith—not by sight.

And Jesus declares his blessing upon those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Indeed, Paul will say that faith comes by hearing,

as the apostolic preaching goes forth to the ends of the earth.

John himself concludes this (30-31).

3. That You May Believe – and Have Life in His Name (v30-31)

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?

This *is* the question for each one of you!

Don’t let this eighth day end without joining with Thomas
and confessing Jesus as your Lord and God!