

“Finding Peace in a Pandemic”

December 6, 2020 (Covid 38 – Live Stream 14)
Isaiah 9: 6; Philippians 4:7 & verses from John 14

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John 14: 27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Last Sunday morning I took advantage of watching the Live Stream of the morning service from my office set-up in my Living Room. Pastor Kim mentioned in her message how for most of us Christmas is going to be very different this year. Everything has changed. The whole world seems out of ‘sync’. During Advent we look at the gifts of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Pastor Kim asked, “What does hope mean for you this year? Has your thinking been changed?” All of these elements of Advent (Hope, Peace, Joy and Love) go together to give meaning to the season...as we wait for and celebrate the coming of Christ into our world at Christmas.

This year some may find these themes are a bit harder to grasp. I know I am having a harder time this year; especially because of this pandemic that has shaken our world to the core.

So it’s a relevant and honest question to ask this week: What does peace mean to you the middle of a pandemic? Has your thinking changed?

Peace...is it freedom from conflict or violence? Quietness? Stillness? No stress?

Even in normal circumstances Peace (as we understand it) is something that is often absent as we prepare for Christmas...as we get caught up in the busyness that fills this season. And now on top of all the rushing, now we have the stressors of pandemic guidelines and ever-changing rules. It feels there is little *peace* to be found.

I was struggling with putting this message together, so I decided to do something radical and I said a prayer. It wasn’t long or complicated, but immediately these words came clearly to my mind. I heard... “peace that surpasses all understanding“...It was a repeated theme of my prayer:

Philippians 4: verse 7 says: *“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

When this whole corona thing started in mid-March we thought “Ok, this is just a blip; we’ll be back on track by Easter;” then by summer; then the goal became Labour Day; Ok ... there was a bit of hope at Thanksgiving; but I still wasn’t allowed to go to my great nephew’s 2nd birthday party. And now Christmas is so close and for many of us it will not be anything like peaceful or normal.

Many of us have experienced some sort of grief and pain in this time of uncertainty. It's hard and even painful to be separated from our loved ones in long term care homes and hospitals and not being able to travel to see your family because of the fear of us taking the virus to them. I recently witnessed the tension as a funeral director struggled to keep visitors following the rules to keep everyone safe, but also to protect their business, and all we wanted to do was to break the rules. Times are tense.

It's hard to accept, but we really don't know when it will all end. Will we ever return to our old normal? There are so many questions and so few answers. But maybe this is a good time to reflect on those parts of our 'old normal' that maybe we are better off leaving behind.

We are so blessed here at Wall Street to have the technology and know-how to offer Zoom, FaceBook, LiveStream, YouTube and now our in-person services to help us stay connected. Keeping in touch with each other is so important and we really have tried to maintain our ties with everyone, the best we can.

In John 14 we heard the familiar scripture of Jesus encouraging his followers, reminding them that the spirit will follow to be with them. *"The world may not know him (Jesus) but you know him, for he (Jesus) lives with you and will be in you by the Spirit."*

And Jesus by the Spirit makes himself known to us in many ways. If we look closely and set our eyes on heavenly things we see that Jesus most often answers our prayers through our connections with each other.

This is one of my favourite Christmas stories. It's about the old shoe cobbler who dreamed one Christmas Eve that Jesus would come to visit him the next day. The dream was so real that he was convinced it would come true.

So the next morning he got up and went out and cut green boughs and decorated his little cobbler shop and got all ready for Jesus to come and visit. He was so sure that Jesus was going to come that he just sat down and waited for Him.

The hours passed and Jesus didn't come. But an old man came. He came inside for a moment to get warm out of the winter cold. As the cobbler talked with him he noticed the holes in the old man's shoes, so he reached up on the shelf and got him a new pair of shoes. He made sure they fit, and that his socks were dry, and sent him on his way.

Still he waited. But Jesus didn't come. An old woman came ... a woman who hadn't had a decent meal in two days. They sat and visited for a while, and then he prepared some food for her to eat. He gave her a nourishing meal and sent her on her way.

Then he sat down again to wait for Jesus. But Jesus still didn't come. Then he heard a little boy crying out in front of his shop. He went out and talked with the boy, and discovered that the boy had been separated from his parents and

didn't know how to get home. So he put on his coat, took the boy by the hand and led him home.

When he came back to his little shoe shop it was almost dark and the streets were emptied of people. And then in a moment of despair he lifted his voice to heaven and said, "Oh Lord Jesus, *why didn't you come?*"

And then in a moment of silence he seemed to hear a voice saying, "Oh shoe cobbler, lift up your heart! I kept my word. Three times I knocked at your friendly door. Three times my shadow fell across your floor. I was the man with the bruised feet. I was the woman you gave something to eat. I was the boy on the homeless street." Jesus had come. The cobbler just didn't realize it.

The cobbler just had to learn to see. Many of us, in the busyness of our lives, have trouble seeing Jesus. We have to take the time to train our eyes to see and our ears to hear.

In this very different Christmas 2020, one that we will never forget, let's look to see where Jesus wants to shine his light, through us.

How we respond in the tough times, or even in the good times, can define our faith. We are all called to live as Jesus did, reaching out to others, and being a blessing.

There are times we don't know the reasons or understand the outcome, but our response is to reach out and offer those gifts of hope, peace...even joy and love. The gifts that we embrace at Christmas are meant to be shared and given every day of the year.

In spite of corona, this past summer was a pretty good one for me and my friends in our condo bubble in Prescott. The weather was exceptional, so almost every day we were able to gather safely under the shade trees and spent some wonderful times together. Looking back on this time we know it was a gift.

One of my friends was dealing with prostate cancer. His mood was positive and he had made his life-ending plans and was carrying on, making the best of each day. In mid-October he went to hospital to get some help with the arthritic pain he was having, and 3 days later he slipped away.

We were all pretty shook up, even though we could all see the blessings; that he went on his terms and he didn't have to make that decision of when to pull the plug. But we were not ready and we miss him.

My friend and I had some interesting talks about faith in the last few years. We talked about big questions that none of us really have definitive answers for. We agreed to disagree on some parts and we both accepted that we don't get the understanding part yet. At his service I mentioned how it gave me peace that he had the answers now. Even though we don't get the answers, we can still stand on God's promises and have that peace that does surpass our understanding.

The next day I was getting ready to go do a service at Athens United when I saw a text that baby Oliver (Beth's little man, only 38 days old) had been taken back to hospital.

I got a call from Beth's friend Jason as I was on my way to pick up my friend Lynn, (who was going with me that day) but my Bluetooth wasn't working and my phone was in the back seat; so Jason called Lynn instead.

I prayed stronger than I normally would for Oliver during the service, and Lynn said it's a good thing I wasn't looking at her. We got in the car after the service and I breathed a sigh of relief after what had been a very tough week and she told me; "It's not going to get any easier." As I looked at her I knew Baby Oliver had passed away.

We were both devastated. After pulling ourselves together, we just wanted to get back here to Wall Street; to be together with our church family. I don't remember a time when I've ever felt our whole church in so much pain.

I knew right away that God was protecting me that day. The theme of my service in Athens had been: "God is Good - All the Time, and All the Time - God is Good!"

And I really don't think I could have given that message with the weight of knowing that horrible news. I didn't feel the goodness or peace of God in that moment at all.

Let's look back at our candle liturgy from this morning.

"...in the flash of clarify that turns on the light of insight and leads us towards wisdom, we find the peace that passes all understanding..."

"But there are things we need to understand. Help us hear you in the stories of those who struggle."

Lynn and I left Wall Street to try and find and comfort our friend Jason. We knew he would be devastated too, for his good friend Beth.

Instead of us comforting him, it was he that gave us peace in the moment. God had already gotten through and spoken to him. Maybe these are not the exact words, but God told him "Do not go into that dark rabbit hole of anger, fear and pain." And God reminded him that we didn't know everything that was ahead for Oliver, and reassured Jay that he had him. Oliver was safe in the caring hands of Jesus.

Even though it was hard, those words — Jason's God moment experience — helped to turn me back around. I had heard God's voice too... through the message of *someone who struggled*.

Again that scripture rings true. "*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"

The kind of peace the world gives is temporary. But the peace that Jesus gives; the peace that passes understanding; that's already been given to us; lasts forever! It's a gift from God to be cherished always.

So where do we find peace in a pandemic?

- In the stories of those among us.
- In the positive examples and attitudes of those around us.
- In recognizing God's still strong voice,
- in knowing that we are not alone, that God is with us always,
- in pushing back the fears of a pandemic and allowing the calm reassurance of God's promises to rise within us.

This year, even among the uncertainties, let's open ourselves to how God wants to partner with us; to be his agents of peace in a troubled and shaken world.

Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

God is with us, we are not alone.
Thanks be to God. Amen