

10.15.2023 Time after Pentecost, 20

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Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

“The God of Peace”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The news and images we have seen over the last week about the attack on Israel by Hamas, and Israel’s swift military response have been both shocking and tragic. The images of death and destruction have seemed almost apocalyptic and eschatological. I pray for peace to be restored among all people in the Middle East, which is home to Jewish, Muslim, and Christian people. These three faiths all trace their roots back to Abraham, and it is my prayer we remember who we are as inheritors of the faith of Abraham, seeking to live in peace by helping one another.

I am not a Middle Eastern historian nor am I an expert on Middle Eastern foreign policy. My longing for peace is rooted in my faith as a Christian and my belief that the Lord God whom Jesus called, “*Abba*,” is the one whom Paul also calls “*the God of peace*.” This God loves all peoples and nations and has called us to pray for our enemies, those that persecute us, and to live as peacemakers in this world.

Yet once again, a dark shroud of death hangs over our world. As I saw the images of both Israeli and Palestinian victims wrapped in burial shrouds and carried by loved ones, I could not help but think of the words of the prophet Isaiah in today’s first reading. Isaiah writes, “*And [the Lord of hosts] will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.*” The shroud of death that Isaiah wrote of once again covers the peoples and nations of this world.

Yet Isaiah, also writes, “*Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth.*” These words written over 2,700 years ago speak of a hope that we must turn toward if we are to live for one another. The God of peace desires us to be peacemakers. However, once again humanity has not chosen peace, and so darkness covers the earth casting a shroud over all peoples and nations. Isaiah’s words accurately reflect humanity’s ongoing struggles with hatred, oppression, violence, and war that wrap human community in a shroud of death.

Yet Isaiah’s hope in a God who would wipe away the tears from all faces must become humanity’s hope. Isaiah’s words about compassion, “*For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat,*”

must become humanity's shared will for one another. I cannot accept any theology that calls upon God or uses God's name to destroy the peoples and nations of this world that God so loves.

Isaiah's words are echoed by John's Revelation (21:3-4), "*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" The ancient Christian hope of a God who will wipe away tears and destroy death remains our hope and our fervent longing. We must continue to embody the God of peace in which death, crying and pain are no more; we must seek to be refuge and shelter to those in need.

Yet again a dark shroud threatens to cover humanity; we find ourselves in discord, strife, enmity, violence, and on the brink of war. Wherever we insist on our way, ignoring the needs of our neighbors, wherever we oppress others to ensure our own prosperity, whenever we are separated from caring for our neighbor, a shroud of darkness hides us from God. Separation from God is death, yet God is always to be found alongside our neighbor suffering in need.

I have been disheartened by ongoing strife in our own nation, by a protracted war in Ukraine, and now by violence that threatens to escalate into total war in the Middle East. More than anytime in recent memory, our world seems to teeter on the brink of a descent into brutality and destruction. We seem to move from one crisis to another with little time to reflect, discern and envision those things that are true, just, and honorable. When I was a young person, I used to think that when I became an adult, I would understand the world. Instead, the struggle today is to remain hopeful while not becoming callous and cynical about my hope and work for peace and fellowship between all peoples and nations.

In today's reading from Philippians, Paul offers us a vision for living, writing, "*Let your gentleness be known to everyone.*" The word "gentleness" that Paul uses can also be translated as "patience" and "forbearance." It is a profound word meaning to know when *not* to apply the strict letter of the law, but rather, knowing when to relax the law and provide mercy. Rather than violent retribution, "an eye for an eye," Paul suggests Christians are to be gentle, calling for patience, mercy, and peace. Paul is pointing to the God beyond human justice, the God whose justice is grace and mercy. This is the God we see in Jesus Christ, the one who forgave from the cross; the one who said, "*Let any among you who is without sin cast the first stone.*"

The Lord is near to those who make God's gentleness known in patience, mercy, and peace. Paul urges us to be people of prayer, writing, "*Do not worry about anything but in everything by*

*prayer... let your requests be made known to God.*” In everything, God is near. More than ever, we are called to pray for our world, our friends, and enemies. Such prayer gives “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.*” Such prayer guards our hearts and minds from cynicism, despair, and violence. Such prayer is the antidote to today’s media barrage that only stokes the flames of anger and division. Prayer is not a retreat from the world, rather, prayer opens us to the nearness of God, opening us to see paths forward with and for others.

Today’s gospel reading is difficult. It describes both God’s grace and judgment. “*Many are called but few are chosen*” reflects God’s constant invitation to all people, and humanity’s constant rejection of God’s invitation into new community. In the parable, God finally gathers the good and the bad into the wedding banquet, reflecting God’s grace for all people. God’s question to the one to who came without a wedding garment, “*Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?*” is not just about clothing, it is a question to someone who has come not prepared in their heart to celebrate God’s banquet, which includes the good and the bad, the just and the sinful, the powerful and the oppressed.

This passage may seem harsh to modern ears, but it reflects humanity’s ongoing indifference to God’s invitation to grace. We go our own ways, turning to God when we are in trouble, while also rejecting God’s invitation to new community. Instead, we are consumed by life’s needs and wants, all the while, forgetting that the God of peace is always near to us calling us to the banquet of all peoples and nations. Forgetting the nearness of God, we attempt to live without God, leading to discord, division, and war. And so, we continue to be covered by darkness. Removing the shroud of death that covers all nations begins in our hearts, clothing our hearts with the garment of grace, and turning in everything, to God in prayer.

How many times have you forgotten prayer only to be overwhelmed by a shroud of darkness covering you and the world? Pray as if everything depended upon God, and act as if everything depended upon you.

In prayer, the God of peace will become your light, so that you might live and act as light and hope in the darkness of this world. In everything, pray for peace and live as light in the darkness.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything pray. “*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*” Amen.