

Messengers of Peace

April 16, 2023

*Based on John 20:19-21. The Risen Christ Brings Peace.*

Every Sunday, in our liturgy, our Declaration of Grace and Gratitude concludes with words along the lines of what we said today: proclaiming a deep peace that passes understanding, followed by a prayer from your pastor that this peace may be with you, and a response from the congregation that this peace may also be with me.

These are no throw-away lines inserted into worship for the sake of fluff. They come directly from the mouth of Jesus in our Lesson today to a fearful, traumatized, trembling congregation hiding behind locked doors, even after the resurrection.

*Peace be with you*, Jesus says, with his wounds still visible. *Receive the Holy Spirit*. Which could also mean *receive this sacred breath*, which he then literally breathes upon them. Now share this peace with the world, Jesus says.

It is the essence of our job description here in the church, these few words we recite in passing through our liturgy. We are, Jesus tells us, to be Messengers of Peace. Which is why, when the response in our liturgy seems a bit lackluster, I insist we say it again. Because I, like you, desperately need the reminder that the peace of Christ, which is our mission to share, truly is first and foremost with *us*. Only then can we rustle up the courage to share that peace in a world that seems so far from it.

A reminder of the peace that passes understanding that is most emphatically with me (and also with you!) came in the form of a story that was shared a couple of weeks ago in our End of Life Seminar by a beloved member of our community who prefers to remain anonymous. I will call her Brenda.

Brenda's father had just died, she recalled in our conversation, and people were coming to the house in ever-increasing numbers. As soon as Brenda would open the door, in would come another family member or friend of the family, sobbing into Brenda's arms. Everyone around her was cracking up, depending on her to be strong for them. But Brenda was about to crack, too. She knew she needed to gather her strength, so she fled to the one place she knew she could be alone and pull herself together: the bathroom.

As Brenda sat on the edge of the tub, her head in her hands, on the verge of falling apart, a vision appeared. It was more like a "presence," really. There are no words to describe it, Brenda said, although she tried.

It was like I was out in space, she said, with millions of points of light surrounding me. One of those points of light she felt sure was her father. Each point of light seemed to be circling toward a particular point, and at the center of that point was God. Not as an image or anything you could describe visually. Again, it was something more like a presence.

In the midst of that presence was a love like Brenda had never felt before, coming from all directions. It was love to an infinite degree, Brenda said. And a deep, deep peace.

I did not ask for this vision, Brenda said. It was completely unexpected. A pure gift that does not really translate into words. It's like the words I am trying to use to describe it can only brush up against the truth of what it was. But it changed me, she said. And in her sharing, it changed the rest of us, too.

Deep peace, flowing over us, is what Brenda shared. God's peace, growing in us.

I would venture a guess that our Lesson from John's Gospel today - and indeed the entire narrative of resurrection in our Scriptures - is something like Brenda's fumbling mumbling attempts to describe the indescribable presence of peace in words that can only brush up against the truth of what it really was.

As my colleague Tawnya Denise Anderson reminds us, the first Easter was one of intense mourning in the aftermath of trauma. For days afterward, the inner circle of Jesus lived in fear, hiding behind locked doors, talking in hushed tones. Even though the very thing that terrified them had already been defeated, it was hard to feel victorious in the moment. But then comes the gift, completely unexpected. A presence that becomes a vision. A deep peace that truly does pass all understanding.

For the disciples - and for us - this peace does not lead to a pie in the sky by and by escapist spirituality. It is not a peace that says all will be better when I die, so I can endure this life if I just get right with God.

This is a peace that is - instead - a glimmer of eternity breaking through into a moment of suffering to comfort God's people. The invitation is to share it, not hoard it. To spread it around so others can benefit from it, too. To invite the rest of the suffering world into it, that all may be transformed into a new creation that has finally figured out how to live together in that peace. Which is why the disciples, who began as students of Jesus, turn into apostles. Sent forth from the resurrection as messengers of peace for *this* life as well as the next.

Brenda's message invites us to do the same. To dwell, in our own souls, so thoroughly in that deep peace, to be so committed to cultivating that love like we have never felt before, that we do in fact *become* the peace the world so desperately needs. Through our Guns 2 Gardens ministry, for example. Through our advocacy for transgender youth, for example. Through our solidarity with recovering addicts in Baltimore, for example. And yes, even with the recovering addicts right here in our own congregation.

To be an Easter people, says Tawnya Denise Anderson, in the wake of the mass shooting in Louisville this week - literally across the street from our national church headquarters - is to live in the perpetual shadow of death and have the temerity to proclaim that God - and we - are more powerful than it. Just like the disciples - turned - apostles do beyond the resurrection.

In order to do this, friends, let us recite our liturgical job description boldly, proudly, with as much conviction as we can muster, even when the words themselves can only brush up against the truth, even when we are

struggling to believe it ourselves: that the deep peace, the peace of Christ, that truly does pass all understanding, really is with you. And also with me.