

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've always loved the story of Jesus' presentation at the temple

Because the story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus

meeting elders Simeon and Anna feels

So familiar.

It's a story that's deeply rooted in the Jewish temple practices

of a particular time and

A Particular place,

And very particular people:

But I also can't help but feel the connections

To every single time someone has brought a baby into a place of worship.

Seriously: I have all the feels when I think of those moments

And, poignantly, how those moments have been missing in our lives since March.

In times when we *aren't* in a pandemic,

church is an incredibly unique opportunity

For people of different generations who aren't related to each other

to interact and build genuine relationships of care, friendship and trust.

Through these intergenerational connections,

we get glimpses of God's deep and abiding peace.

The peace of God is a deep and powerful thing.

We learn about God's peace in scripture,

Particularly in the Gospel according to John,

When Jesus is getting the disciples ready for his death and resurrection,

Distinguishing between the peace he gives and the world's peace,
And also in his appearances after the resurrection, too.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel both warn against false prophets who talk of peace
where there is no peace:

True peace, God's peace,
is not superficial and does not try to cover up or condone oppression.

God's peace is not used in an authoritarian way, either,
to force silence when people are crying out in need or in pain.

The world's peace can be coercive in this way; God's peace is not.

God's peace is liberating.

You can hear it in the words of Simeon's song:

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

We sing a version of this prayer, called the *nunc dimittis*,

As part of compline,

the service of daily prayer sung right before going to bed at night.

It is also read at funerals,

And there's this sense embedded into the prayer of the deep, liberating peace

That comes from an encounter with the Gospel,

From meeting, face-to-face,

Either at the end of a long life like Simeon's or Anna's or at the end of a long day,

God's grace and love for all creation embodied in Jesus Christ.

This prayer puts into words that sense of release and relief,
Letting go of all fear and doubt and striving to attain our own salvation:
God's salvation has been prepared in the presence of all peoples, for all to see.

Again, this text feels particularly poignant:

A funeral text at a time when there are more deaths
and thus more need for funerals than usual,
but also, necessarily, more restrictions on funeral gatherings.

It is important to name, too, that the difference between God's peace
And the world's peace has been evident in the way that elders and other
Populations more vulnerable to Covid-19 have been treated
over the course of the pandemic.

The world may, in some cases, be at peace with elders dying at high rates
From the virus, and may even suggest that these deaths mean less:
This is false prophesy, just another way of saying peace where there is no peace.
The peace of God does not devalue the lives of elders.

The peace of God does not look away from or contribute to the oppression
That leads to higher Covid deaths among Black and Latino people.

The peace of God is *not* death,
It is salvation, freedom from the fear and power of death in all of its forms.
When the faithful elders in the temple meet the couple and their infant son,
They recognize that he is the incarnation of that freedom, that peace.

Death is all around at the edges of their conversation:

In the revelation of the Holy Spirit to Simeon,

In Anna's long life as a widow,

In Simeon's message to Mary: "and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

The power and presence of death is everywhere, just as it seems to be, now.

And yet, right in the middle of that death-filled reality is an even more powerful reality:

God's peace and love, God's grace in human form,

Immanuel, God-with-us, Jesus Christ.

The peace of God is revealed in this meeting in the temple,

Through the infant Jesus of course,

But also through the prophets, the elders, Anna and Simeon,

And in their interaction with the parents and baby

They not only receive God's peace and bear witness to God's peace,

They are themselves embodied messengers of that peace:

They give the gift of God's peace to others in the temple,

And even to us, so many years and languages and continents away.

I asked on the bishop's blog on the synod website for folks to share

Stories of times that you experienced the peace of God

Through an interaction with an elder.

Pastor Sharon Fox Bogen, who serves Zion Lutheran Church in Tigerton and

Redeemer Wittenberg,

Shared an experience from a weekend shift as an on-call hospital chaplain.

Pastor Sharon responded to a call to pray with a patient

Coming out of surgery.

It was near the end of the day and she was feeling tired and worn down,

Also, she and the nurses wondered a bit if the patient was really ready enough

For prayer, having just recently come out of surgery.

But the patient was really grateful for company and Pastor Sharon found

That she was, too.

Pastor Sharon writes: I was so moved by her words...

asking God to be able to accept whatever diagnosis and health needs that were ahead of her.

Her faith and trust in the God I preach so often strengthened my whole being,

healed me, made me know God's love was present and alive in this tiny moment.

So freeing to not have politics, pandemic, or denomination divide us!

So true to have suffering's vulnerability make strangers one!

Love surrounded the patient and the weary pastor.

This encounter makes clear what we've begun to guess from

The encounter of the Holy Family and the elder prophets in the temple:

That the peace of God, shared between people in holy moments like these,

Is an experience of mutual blessing, grace, and liberation.

We are strengthened and renewed, not by our own strength,

Not by the strength of others,

But because in mutual vulnerability and suffering,

We meet Jesus Christ:

God who is revealed as an infant born in difficult conditions;

A child forced to live as a refugee and an exile;

An unhoused person who eats with outcasts;

A criminal who is publicly executed on a cross.

This is the God who is with us and all creation,

Who is true and deep peace in the midst of all suffering.

Love and peace surrounds the elders, the youth,

All who are weary and yearning for some rest and renewal,

For peace that is real and trustworthy and true.

My prayer is that, even in days when we aren't gathering in person,
God's peace will find you.

I trust that God's peace has and will find you in the midst of this pandemic,
Because that's what God does:

God shows up in the last place you'd expect an all-powerful deity to be.

God shows up in the places of most suffering, vulnerability

And exhaustion,

In places where it seems like death might have the final say.

Like Simeon,

We've *seen* Jesus,

So we know and trust, even when it's impossible to believe on our own:
death doesn't have the final say.

Salvation has been revealed, to all people.

And with people across many generations we pray:

Lord, give us your peace.

Your Word has been fulfilled.

Amen.

Bishop Anne Edison-Albright

December 27, 2020