

John 14:1-3, 25-29

Has anyone besides me been looking around lately to see if someone is building an ark?! I'll really worry if the animals at our "Blessing of the Animals" service this afternoon start coming to the church "two by two!"

What a gloomy spring we've had so far. But those who have experienced floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and nuclear meltdowns have had it much worse. And, if that's not bad enough, I heard this week the locusts are coming to some states! Their 13 year cycle has commenced. Then, we look ahead and realize this fall is the ten year anniversary of 9/11. The death of bin Laden has already refreshed those sad memories. We have learned crises can happen anytime and anyplace. The world has so many problems that if Moses had come down from Mt. Sinai today—the two tablets he carried would be aspirin!

Unfortunately, humankind has always had to deal with individual errors, natural disasters, and human violence. These events are devastating, but the fact is, most people can eventually cope with huge disasters because people are drawn together in community for support, as we discussed last week. What is often more difficult are the quiet personal issues of pain, sorrow and disappointment. It is these nagging problems that reduce us to despair. If national crises don't elevate us to heroic living, at least they preoccupy us for a few days and allow us to forget our own problems before they come creeping back like a gray fog.

I read about a church in Georgia who did a pictorial directory. Everybody got all dressed up to have their pictures taken. One woman arrived all disheveled. Hurrying for the appointment, she knocked over a coffeepot and drenched her clothes. She had a sense of humor and had her picture taken anyway.

When the directory was published the pastor looked through it and saw this woman's picture and smiled. He reflected how he could put a caption under many of the pictures. Under hers he would put, "Coffeepot overturned!" Some captions would be joyful, like: "Just married" or "Newly retired and loving it." Others, though, would read, "Got fired yesterday," "Marriage in trouble," "Lost spouse and is lonely," "Struggling to overcome a rotten childhood," or "Fighting cancer."

Even though I've been here only a few months, I think I could add a few to our new directory, too. We pastors are privileged to share the lives of many people. We know while the great storms are raging in the world, inside almost everyone there are smaller storms. The big storms of history usually break and pass over. The little ones inside us keep ebbing and flowing, eroding the shoreline of the spirit. This is when people begin looking for that priceless gift of inner peace.

Some of you may have heard of the rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix. He led a promiscuous life, indulging in drugs and behaving outrageously. At the end of a concert in 1970, Jimi smashed his guitar. The audience screamed and applauded, but suddenly stopped. Jimi had fallen on his knees and was staying in that position, motionless. He broke the stillness by asking, "If you know real peace, I want to visit with you backstage." But apparently nobody responded. Several days later he died from an overdose of drugs. Peace, real inner peace, eluded Jimi Hendrix.

Jimi had lots of money, but, as the saying goes, “The poorest of all are those who don’t know who to thank for the sunshine, or who to trust in the dark.”

Don Allen of Photoplay Magazine said, “It has always been true that, the more man gains of this world, the more he hungers for and needs the peace found only in the world of the spirit.”

It's that peace Jesus is promising in today's lesson from John, that section called "The Last Discourse", which is Jesus' last will and testament for his disciples. He says, "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." That's a powerful promise that includes peace about dying because death is not the end, but it also includes peace about living because we are not alone.

Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will bring to our minds his words and teachings so we will have the deep and lasting peace right here and now that Jimi Hendrix and so many others seek. But how does it happen?

Chapter 14 begins with Jesus' words again, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.” Jesus knew in a very short time life for the disciples was going to collapse in chaos around them. At such a time there was only one thing to do, stubbornly hold on to a trusting belief in the God they knew and the Jesus they were learning to know. The quiet and untroubled heart is found in a person whose life is spiritually grounded in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Biblical word for peace is “Shalom” –peace be with you. This peace is not a meaningless “have a nice day.” It's not denial of reality or ignorance. Someone once said, “If you can keep your head while everyone else around you is losing theirs, you probably don't understand what's really going on!” And this peace is more than absence of war or conflict.

The promised peace of Jesus is not dependent on outward circumstances, but is dependent on the object of our focus. When I say to you before our morning prayer to relax, what I'm really saying is “FOCUS.” In Isaiah we read, “You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord is an everlasting **rock**.” (Isaiah 26:3-4 NKJV)

One of my favorite stories is about two artists. Each was commissioned to paint a scene on the theme of peace. The first artist painted a pastoral picture, a beautiful meadow with gently flowing grass, soft clouds and streaming sunlight. The other artist painted a great, crashing storm along the seacoast. Huge waves of sea and foam crashed against the cliffs with streaks of lightning and torrents of rain. If one looked closely at the cliff, there in a crevice sat a bird at rest on her nest, sheltered in the storm by the mighty rock, patiently warming her eggs, the hope of her future.

At rest in the middle of the storm, sheltered by the Rock, that's our goal as disciples, and that's Jesus' promise. But it often eludes us, doesn't it. In order to find peace, we don't need to own more, we need to trust more. But in order to trust, we must take time to build a trustworthy relationship. We want answers and instant solutions, but instead God often offers us only —Himself. For God's truth

to move from our head to our hearts, we must practice a daily time of stillness. We know that, but the truth is, “we are too tired to run and too busy to rest.”

Ron Hutchcraft, busy author, speaker, and counselor, tells about his battle with stress. One day Ron decided to “interview” the family gerbil. “Tell me, Gerbie,” Ron asked, “What do you have planned for today?” “First, breakfast,” Gerbie replied, “and then get started.” “Doing what?” Ron questioned. “Why, the same thing I did yesterday and the day before that.” “What’s that?” Ron asked again. “The wheel.” And sure enough, Gerbie climbed on his little wheel and started running in circles. Hours later, he was still running. The more Ron watched that gerbil, the more he saw himself. He had his own personal “wheels”—demands, deadlines, aggravations, ambitions. He felt as if he were running in circles, and he longed for peace. He read in Psalm 34, “Seek peace and pursue it.” He realized peace isn’t automatic or passive. It must be intentionally pursued.

Sometimes, we need to get control of our lives and our wheels and MAKE time for what is really important. I read about something to help us. It’s a brand new invention for people who want to rest in an atmosphere of quiet tranquility. (Show cord) It’s called a “phoneless cord!” I only wish I had invented it.

I also read about “light therapy,” a treatment for “winter depression” or S.A.D., Seasonal Affective Disorder. The prescription is to sit in front of fluorescent panels for a period of time. This has the effect of lengthening the day and the body reacts accordingly. At first light therapy was ridiculed; now it’s being taken more seriously.

I can’t evaluate the scientific merit of light therapy. I hesitate even to mention it lest I encourage those who decide they will do better on the golf course for an hour on Sunday morning than sitting in church. But I take the risk because I think it’s a fascinating metaphor for God’s grace. It teaches us that light has a power outside of our own. It was there before we were born and will be there after we are gone. It’s available to us only by receiving it.

We can say the same thing about grace. Yes, a spiritual life requires effort, but there comes a time when we must rest and allow God’s power, that power outside of our own, to work within us and through us into the situation. It’s not easy, but the alternative is to spin our wheels and still be no closer to answers or peace.

However, if we make time to sit quietly, perhaps in prayer or scripture meditation, and receive what God has given us, we will find power not unlike the power of the sun. The incomprehensible power of God’s peace can touch our lives like the gentle warmth of spring even in the middle of a violent spring storm.

It reminds me of the words of a contemporary Christian song:

“Sometimes (God) calms the storm. He whispers, ‘Peace be still.’

He can settle any sea, but it doesn’t mean He will.

Sometimes He holds us close and lets the wind and waves go wild.

Sometimes He calms the storm—and other times He holds His child.”

Being held by God is what we see in someone’s life when we see them survive some adversity and we ask, “How can they possibly keep going? How can they be so brave in the face of death or illness or heartache or loss; when life has been so cruel?” People at peace have learned to surrender their circumstances to God’s

control. They have learned, "If you can't fix it, let it go, let God work in it and redeem it!" We see a power that comes not from their own strength, but from God.

As one person put it, "In my darkest moments, I know God isn't causing my despair. God is calling me back to life. I can't see the future, but I can remember the past. God has been faithful in the past so I will trust He's still on the job. I choose to believe He's in this mess and will allow something good to come from it, so I won't give in to my fear or give up my hope."

That's the trust that makes the Christian life practical. We can choose to be troubled and afraid, but the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians:

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the **peace** of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6, 7 NRSV)

So, when we're in the middle of one of life's storms that makes us weak in the knees and ready to fall, let's remember:

God is with us and is whispering in our ear, "**I still love you, lean on me.**"