

"A Peace That Doesn't Give Up"

2 Thessalonians 3:16

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[My name is Hannah Lundberg, I'm a third year Master of Divinity student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and I'm in the ordination candidacy process with the Des Moines Presbytery in Iowa. It's an honor to be with you today for the Peace and Global Witness offering. Our Scripture reading today is very short. One single verse, but a verse that has power. Listen now for the Word of God, from 2 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 16: "Now may the God of peace give you peace at all times and in every circumstance. God be with you all!"]

What is peace for you? Is it a simple state of being? The way things are until something goes wrong? Is peace the absence of conflict?

Right now, for many of us, the way we offer peace to one another in our communities and congregations looks different than it used to. For all of my time as a Presbyterian, one of my favorite parts of gathering in person with a community for worship has been to greet my community with words and signs of peace. "Peace be with you!" we excitedly say to one another, shaking hands, embracing each other in hugs, catching a high five from a child who is ambitiously running around trying to reach everyone she can get to in a short amount of time. In those moments there is delight at community, a sense of togetherness, and the awareness that we are sharing much more than a handshake and words of peace. Whatever your particular worshipping community has adapted for this season, I imagine that the passing of the peace looks different right now. It doesn't feel the same to type "peace" in a Zoom chat box, honk your horn at a drive-up service, comment a peace sign emoji on Facebook, or wave to a neighbor from at least six feet away. I grieve those losses for myself, and I grieve them with you. I am so glad that we can honor our need to be together in different ways right now. But it is still hard. I cannot wait until the day when I can again high-five that child collecting peace like candy while weaving through the pews on a Sunday morning. Things are different, but at the same time, I wonder if in this strange season, we might grow to understand our rituals of peace and peacemaking in new and deeper ways.

So often, peace is an easy filler word in church circles. It feels universally nice, gentle, and loving. If we don't feel like defining it further, it can give us a vague feeling of warm and fuzzy goodness. We can use it as a loosely-defined hope for the world, as an email signature, as a churchy way of saying "greet the person next to you," and perhaps most dangerously, as a way of getting away from the hard work of engaging conflict, sitting in uncertainty, and facing the sometimes stark realities of our messy world. But my goodness, isn't peace so much more than that?

In 2 Thessalonians, like in many of the letters we see from Paul and others in the Bible, the author uses this verse as a conclusion of peace that can feel somewhat formulaic. If we want to, we can read this verse as a routine way of signing off a letter, just the same as we sometimes throw in "peace!" at the end of an email. No more than a substitute for "sincerely." But if we read it that way, I think we miss some of the heart of what peace can really be. I'll read it again. "Now may the God of peace give you peace at all times and in every circumstance. God be with you all!" Peace. At all times. In all ways. Wow. What does that look like, to be assured of this great abiding peace, no matter what life throws at us?

This summer I have been working as a chaplain in a hospital, taking my first unit of clinical pastoral education, a hands-on piece of ministry training that many seminary students like myself take part in. It has been intense to work in a hospital in the midst of COVID-19, and deeply humbling. Especially without visitors in the hospital, I encountered many patients feeling lonely, worried, and deeply frightened. Peacefulness is rarely the first order of the day for any of us in this current moment. We are facing a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, serious natural disasters, heightened visibility of racial injustice, and a re-structuring of so many pieces of life we have taken for granted in the past. For the many people I met in the hospital who were dealing with a frightening medical reality on top of everything else, peace was often hard to come by. And yet, as a chaplain, trying to offer some semblance of peace was one of my biggest tools and most difficult tasks.

For patients who need to focus all the energy they have on physical healing, starting from a place of spiritual peace is essential. There is a tangible, physiological benefit for our healing when we feel at peace. Many times, I encountered fellow humans in the hospital who came in overburdened by outside stress, worrying about their kids' school, another family member who was sick, a fight with their partner, or any one of the many many things that can leave us feeling less than peaceful in normal life. As a chaplain, I tried to come alongside them and lift some of that weight, to give space for peace, and space for healing. And yet so many times I have found myself praying with someone for peace, and feeling a twinge of my own hopelessness creep in. Was I doing enough? As I spoke words of peace, I could supply a gentle voice and reassuring body language, but by myself I could only get so far. I am so glad that I was not offering peace alone. Our verse says it so well: "May the God of peace give you peace at all times and in every circumstance." Surely, and thankfully, as I spoke words of peace, the God of the universe brought real, abiding peace in places where it was most needed. At all times. In every circumstance.

Each of those experiences in the hospital made me think a lot about how we are most aware of peace when we feel its absence. We rarely yearn for peace while relaxing on a beach, but in the midst of the fire, it's the first thing we need. If you've experienced these last few months at all like I have, this is a time when we all truly need some peace. And when it feels like the world is falling down around you, it can be awfully hard to find that refuge. I'm glad we're not alone in the search. Time and again in the Bible, we see people in desperate need of comfort seeking God's peace. And what does God do? God shows up. And God works alongside them.

When I am searching for peace, I often think of the image of Jesus calming the stormy seas. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we see the disciples in the boat with a sleeping Jesus, watching the waves rise and storm clouds gather, anxiously trying to control the situation, feeling increasingly out of control, until finally they wake Jesus crying "Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?" And what does Jesus do? He rises, calmly, and then rebukes the storm, saying, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind dies down and it is completely calm. But even here, God is not done with the disciples. They are not called to just enjoy a peaceful boat ride, conveniently blessed by God's presence. They are called to further action. Time and time again, people in the Bible, and people in our lives today are called deep into the storm, where things feel uncertain and out of control, where sometimes it feels like the only thing we can hold onto is the hope of God's peace. Like the patients I met in the hospital this summer, we have hard, healing work to do ahead of us. God's peace is a starting place, a grounding position we can return to when things feel unwieldy, but not merely a safe harbor for our own comfort. We are called to co-creation and collaboration with God, embracing that peace, love, and grace, and sharing it with others. We are called to step into the uncertainties, firm in our foundation, and driven to move forward with boldness.

Similarly, the call for peace in 2 Thessalonians is not a call for passivity. Earlier in the letter, we hear a strong message for the Thessalonians to engage in hard work for the kingdom of God. They are called to keep going out into the world, facing uncertain realities, persecutions, and afflictions. When the author reminds them of God's peace, at all times, in all ways, it is not just a tidy conclusion, but part of a challenge we hear over and over again in the Bible. Keep doing the work. God is right alongside you.

I believe that peace is a necessary state for growth to happen. When the water we swim in is peace, we have room for growth. For change. For meaningful conflict, challenge, and justice-seeking. Like patients in the hospital, or strangers shaking hands at a worship service for the first time, this state of peace gives us room to grow, to stretch, to change. When we are certain of God's deep, abiding peace, what risks might we be willing to take? Can we pay more attention to systemic injustices? Can we question the ways we've been educated to overlook the needs of the marginalized? Can we show up for members of our community going through something harder than we want to face ourselves? Can we show up for ourselves? Even when a troubling relationship, devastating diagnosis, or fear of the unknown keeps pulling us back down? This summer, whenever I met a new patient in the hospital, and I spoke words of peace to them, I imagined a big bubble of love encircling us both in the room. The bubble's not impenetrable. It doesn't keep out bad news, or stop scary things from coming close, but it is a reminder that God is there; the God of peace. That gives me strength to keep going, and to keep trying.

"May the God of peace give you peace at all times and in every circumstance." If you could hear those words, really hear them, and know their truth for you and for your community, how might you live differently? I have to ask myself that everyday. Do I know God's peace? Really know it? And am I willing to take up the challenge that it calls me to? Am I ready to nurture, grow, and share that peace, even when I feel afraid? Some days I'm not so sure. But even in my hesitancy, God keeps reaching out. And a small voice says once again "May the God of peace give you peace at all times and in every circumstance. God be with you all!" As we carry that forward, may the passing of the peace be more than a handshake. Let us be active peacemakers, bold in what we are called to do, and confident in the source of our peace.

May the peace of Christ be with you all, now and forever.