

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

Shalom: The Way to Reconciliation

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Reflect: Our Lenten journey to the ways of shalom has brought us to the final week — Holy Week. It is a week that starts with the triumphal entry into the Holy City where soon the cheering crowds will become jeering crowds no longer praising Jesus but condemning him. How quickly the tide can turn. And yet, as the week ends with the cross of Good Friday and the tears of grief filling our Holy Saturday, joy will return. Resurrection Sunday comes and we are reminded that in Christ, God was reconciling the world. As we journey through Holy Week exploring the theme of reconciliation, think of the

hurts, grudges and hatred that need to be nailed to the cross and laid to rest in a “tomb.” Think about the healing power of reconciliation and where you have seen it in your life.

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

Each day during Holy Week, think about the hope we have in the promise of the resurrection and add prayers to your tree, railing or fence; make them prayers for the “new” things you are hoping for in your life.

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28

Let our voices shout out

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. — Isaiah 1:17

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” — Luke 19:38–40

As Christians, we have a biblical mandate to seek justice by speaking out against systems of oppression that exploit, dehumanize and abuse people. Just as Jesus spoke against corruption in society, so must we. But what does this call look like when it interferes with our understanding of peace? Those who greeted Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, not a powerful war horse that Roman soldiers rode on, misunderstood the peace God was seeking to bring into the world.

Society has taught us that peace is the absence of conflict. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines societal peace as “a state of tranquility or quiet such as freedom from civil disturbance.” Unfortunately, this understanding of peace does not consider the inequities of society that call for us to speak up, not to remain silent so that the proverbial boat will not be rocked. The Pharisees wanted silence from the people. They wanted silence from Jesus. But peace doesn’t come from staying silent. Staying silent only perpetuates a system that maintains the tranquility of the privileged. Is that really peace?

As we begin Holy Week, we must ponder two questions: Can there be peace in the world with no justice? And will it be our voices crying out or will the stones have to shout for us?

Lord, guide us this Holy Week on our journey for justice. Help us understand the true meaning of peace. Strengthen our voices so that we continue speaking up for what is right. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 29

Seeking reconciliation when hope seems lost

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. — Romans 12:18

When we read this verse within Scripture, I think we can all agree that yes, if it is possible, our greatest goal is to live peaceably with all. This is something that so many of us strive for, but when we look around us it sometimes feels like an impossible feat.

We see political parties consistently at conflict with each other. We see movements trying to change systemic problems, but these movements are always greeted by opposition. This whole goal of living peaceably seems pretty impossible when we are at odds with our families and neighbors in ways we may never have been before. Even in his last week of life on Earth, Jesus had a less than peaceable moment: overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple.

The conflicts and injustices of the world do their best to bring us down. In these moments, I turn to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. It’s a speech that was spoken during a time when the dream Dr. King had was nowhere near the reality that he was living in. Even though his surroundings seemed grim, his speech was filled with hope for equality, justice, unity, peace and overall reconciliation.

Let us remember when things seem to be crumbling around us, as they seemed especially to be for Jesus’ followers as his last week of earthly life unfolded, nothing is too great for our God. Let us keep that dream of peace alive even when the darkness seems overpowering.

God of peace, we look around and it is sometimes hard to find hope. We pray that even when we don’t see it, that we can be people who call forth hope — hope for peace and reconciliation — in a world that so gravely needs it. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 30

Radical reconciliation

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” — Matthew 21:23–27

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. — Matthew 5:23–24

It's hard to seek reconciliation when tensions continue to rise and where conflict is around every corner, as Jesus witnessed with the Pharisees early in the week leading to his crucifixion. Yet the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear how important reconciliation is within relationships here on Earth. It's so important, that before you come to the altar with your gift, if there is any animosity between you and someone else, you must go and be reconciled. This is something that I find challenging and sometimes seems impossible to do.

The time we are living in has brought family members against each other, has broken lifelong friendships and has also caused us to greatly dislike people we might not even fully know. I don't want to always try and be reconciled with my brother or sister. Sometimes the easiest thing seems to be to just hold all the anger, hate and animosity within us and push it down without doing anything about it.

Reconciliation these days seems to be a radical thing to do. It's radical because it's not easy. But maybe doing something radical might be the very thing that starts the healing process with someone who you've had animosity with. During this week, may we slowly take steps toward forgiveness and healing, knowing that when we forgive and seek reconciliation we are also given the gift of letting go of the toxins in our own lives. May we allow the Spirit to work in places we can't, to heal and bring peace in ways we cannot even imagine.

God of heaven, heal our hearts and give us the ability to start the process of radical reconciliation. Remind us that it can take time and help us to endure when it seems to just get harder. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31

The work of humility

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." — John 13:1-11

He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. — Genesis 33:3-4

Long before Jesus stunned his friends by stooping down and humbly washing their feet during what would be their last Passover meal together, there is another story of humility to share this Holy Week.

The Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau presents a very raw depiction of revenge, anger and deception. From the start of their story, we see that the two boys were always very different, and most of the time at odds with each other.

The rivalry of the two brothers comes to a head toward the end of their father Isaac's life. It was then they knew that he would give a blessing to Esau, the oldest son. Yet both Rebekah, their mother, and Jacob, the youngest son, tricked Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing. Esau was devastated from being so deeply deceived. As the story continues, it leads to Jacob running away so his brother doesn't kill him and results in years of distance between them out of fear and animosity.

It is through the promptings of God that Jacob returns to his brother to start the reconciliation process. On the day Jacob meets with Esau for the first time, he bows down as an act of humility in front of his brother. He came to his brother acknowledging his wrong and that he had deceived him. Humbling himself, admitting his faults and coming before his brother show the start of the reconciliation process and lead to the embrace of two greatly estranged brothers.

For any relationship in need of reconciliation, so much of it has to begin with admitting the faults typically on both sides of the relationship in order to start the repair. Humility is challenging, but it is something that we can practice within our lives. Let us not forget it took Jacob many years before this happened, and much of his decision came through the promptings of God. Jacob showed humility, and through this we see the embracing of two brothers.

Dear God, provide us with the humility we need so that we can find peace within our relationships. Help us to seek forgiveness. Help us to stoop down and wash another's feet for

it is through our humility and in our being vulnerable that healing can begin. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 1

Love one another

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” — John 13:34–35

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. — Psalm 89:14

As the disciples gathered with Jesus in the upper room for their last meal together, Jesus announced something startling. One of them will betray him. We know it is Judas, who leaves the dinner party to do the unthinkable: turn his friend over to those seeking to take his friend's life. But after we learn what Judas will do and Judas leaves, Jesus gives a new commandment to “love one another” — to love no matter what others might do to you. It seems an impossible commandment to see through, doesn't it? Yet we must. It is not an option, but a mandate. That is why this day in Holy Week is called “Maundy Thursday.” The word maundy is Latin for “mandate.”

Love is a mandate and that love requires reconciliation. And reconciliation requires inward work in order to seek peace and forgiveness. It also requires an action focused on justice and a restitution of wrongs. When two parties are at odds with one another, typically there is a side that needs to forgive the wrong that was done and a side that requires justice of the wrongdoer. Of course, every relationship is unique, yet justice can always be found in the hard work of restoring what was once broken.

Let us walk in the Spirit and be led by our God to bring this justice to a world that so greatly needs it. Loving one another as Christ has loved us is the work that we as believers have been called to do. This is the heart of shalom, and we have a chance to bring love and reconciliation into our own lives and within our own communities.

Dear God, as we work on the restoration of our relationships let us remember Jesus' words about loving one another. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Good Friday, April 2

The cross of reconciliation

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. — John 19:16b–17

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. — Romans 5:10

Our Lenten journeys have led us to Golgotha where the ultimate display of reconciliation is seen through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Through Paul's writings we understand that he considers the work that was done by Jesus Christ as a work of reconciliation. God is the reconciler, and we are the ones who are reconciled, having our sins wiped clean. Nothing was done on our part in order to bring about this reconciliation, but rather it is something that we can fully receive. This is a more powerful and sacrificial love than we have ever seen.

Right now is a time to ponder and meditate on this reconciliation that we have so lovingly been given. I hope this can be the reminder of what we have been given, and through knowing that deep love and restoration, that we too can be ones to live in a way that is unlike what we see so often within this world. To repair a broken world, we must be Christ to one another. We must act as ones who know the redemptive power of being reconciled.

God, we come before you filled with gratitude that while we were sinners your Son died for us, bringing reconciliation to all. We pray that we never forget your sacrifice to save us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 3

Doing what is right

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. — Matthew 27:57–61

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. — Proverbs 21:3

Proverbs tells us “to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” And Joseph, a man from Arimathea, did just that. He did a righteous, just thing in giving Jesus a proper burial. He didn't think of what others might say about his selfless act nor did he worry about what his wealthy friends would say about giving a radical, itinerant rabbi who was mockingly labeled “King of the Jews” a place in a tomb that was to be for him when he died.

Like Joseph, God wants us to step out of the shadows and stand up for what we believe in. God wants us to do acts of selfless love. Anyone can stay comfortably in the background and give a sacrifice in silence. It takes true strength, courage and love to do the right thing. On this Holy Saturday, how is God compelling you “to do

righteousness and justice”?

Lord, show me how to truly love those around me. Help me to step out of my comfort zone and give me the strength and courage to take action for what is right. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.



EASTER

Easter Sunday, April 4 *Hang in there*

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and

to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. — Luke 24:1-12

You're not much of a morning person, are you, pastor? The chiding was coming from the big, bald, burly farmer standing next to me in the slushy snow. I smiled. Inside, though, I was cursing the idea of an Easter sunrise service. Why couldn't the women in Scripture set their alarm for 9 a.m. to get to the tomb? It wasn't because I didn't function till my third cup of coffee; getting up before the crack of dawn in the New England community I served meant enduring still-frigid temperatures.

My toes were numb with cold. I wished my throbbing knee was numb, too. I had smacked it on a headstone

as I made my way to the area in the cemetery where the service was being held. This was an ecumenical gathering and, being the new Presbyterian pastor, I was happy to let the Methodist minister plan and take the lead. And take the lead she did. She gave a perky greeting that made the big, bald, burly farmer look at me slyly. She recited Scripture, gave a homily and broke the communion bread with nimble fingers. Fingers? I couldn't feel mine. She did all of this without reading from notes. My turn came. I fumbled with the paper my closing prayer was written on and the flashlight in which to see the words. With my less than enthusiastic "Amen," the service was over, and folks scurried back to their warm homes.

I remained frozen in place, but not from the cold. I was frozen with dismay. It was still dark. I thought the idea of an Easter sunrise service was to see the sun rise. I didn't risk frostbite not to see the dawn's first rays. It was more than just seeing the sun, though. I needed to see the Son. I had been questioning my call to this community. How did a former fashion editor from Manhattan wind up in a little struggling community, freezing in a dark cemetery on Easter? Should I leave? Where was God calling me next?

Just then I realized not everyone left the cemetery. The big, bald, burly farmer was still by my side. He didn't chide me. "I'll wait with you to see the sunrise," he said softly. He motioned to his pick-up truck and we drove to the highest hill of the cemetery, which offered the most amazing view of the little village below. We got out and stood in silence. I wasn't sure what the farmer's prayers were, but I knew mine: "God, let this Easter be a new beginning."

The black sky began turning light gray. Soon pinks and oranges appeared on the horizon. My heavy heart lightened along with the sky. When the bright ball appeared with its

rays stretching out like heavenly arms ready for an embrace, I felt my eyes water. I heard a voice, not from heaven, but from the farmer: "I hope you hang in there with us." All I could do was nod "yes."

Later that morning, after the traditional worship service was over, I thanked the farmer for waiting with me to see the sunrise and wondered out loud why no one else hung around. He didn't have an answer, but just laughed and shrugged.

It's been years since that cold Easter morning and I still remember how everyone left when it was still dark out. It got me thinking about how many times I have turned around too soon before seeing God's light shine in my life. After all, if I had not hung in there during the dark days of a struggling congregation, I never would have been able to experience the moments of resurrection in people's lives — those moments when the light shines and we realize, yes, death does not have the last word.

This Easter, hang in there when the sun's rays seem to take forever to break through. For Easter is a promise that a new day does dawn. Hope does shine. And if you're tempted to turn back into the darkness before the light breaks through, then may there be a big, bald, burly angel waiting beside you, whispering, "Hang in there. Easter hope is dawning."

God of resurrection hope, thank you for the promise that death never has the last word. Thank you for how darkness always gives way to light. But most of all, thank you for the light of your Son, Jesus, that shines brightly in our lives. As we begin this season of Eastertide, may we hear our Risen Lord greet us with "Shalom" and may that wish for peace become a reality in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.