

THIRD WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to Healing

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Reflect: In Hebrew, “shalom” can also mean wholeness. When Jesus first appeared to his friends as the Risen Lord, he greeted them with words of shalom. “Peace,” he said. What he was wishing for them was healing in their grieving and wholeness for their shattered dreams. What healing do you need this Lent? What would it take to achieve wholeness in the life of your immediate family, church community or neighborhood? And do you have the courage to be the one who stands amid the brokenness and proclaims shalom — wholeness — to others?

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

This past week, the daily devotionals talked about peace being able to take away fear, peace being able to produce joy, and peace that can be seen when we dare to move closer to God and keep our eyes on Christ. Add to your prayer “tree” petitions for those who are afraid, for those who harbor resentment and for those who perhaps have turned away from God. Write their name (or even your name, if need be) on a strip of fabric or paper. Pray over each name. Now prepare for the third week of Lent by thinking about healing and wholeness.

Third Sunday in Lent, March 7

A peaceful rest is possible

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. — Psalm 4:8

Another casualty of the continuing pandemic is the lack of a good night's sleep, which is not good as sleepless nights can aggravate physical and mental health problems, according to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Take a look around; there does seem to be more commercials for sleep aids and more advertisements for apps that will help one doze off peacefully. Sleeping aids and apps aside, Lent is a season to breathe deeply and center ourselves — to find space where wholeness and healing can thrive.

Lent is a season that traditionally focuses heavily on confession, penitence and forgiveness. The moving of our lives closer to God through these activities can be powerful, easing our minds and our souls. To sleep in the understanding of the love of God and the sacrifice of the Son for us, leads all parts of our life to a fundamental deep peace. And to the sleep that might eludes us: Don't count sheep. Count blessings. And peace will come.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to so confess and offer penance that we may find as we turn in at night, peace will be the blanket that covers us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 8

Simple fixes can heal differences

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. — Romans 14:13–21

There are so many things that get in the way of peace in the world, and many of them are so obscure, such as the way

you wear your hair, what you eat or how you dress. Even among the faithful, things such as when, how and where you worship can get in the way of peace.

A few years ago, there was a group of ministers and rabbis in Edinburgh working to include the Muslim community in their interfaith service, but the Muslim members were not coming to the planning meetings. It seems the organizers always met at the same time as the call to prayer for the Muslim community. There was a simple fix: They decided not to meet during the Islamic prayer time.

They also needed to figure out how to include their Muslim brothers and sisters in the service itself. They did this by arranging the Imam's prayer to occur in the ecumenical service at the very time for Islamic prayer. When it was time, the Imam gave the call to prayer. He laid out his prayer rug in the church. Muslims who were attending the interfaith service laid their prayer rugs in the aisles and prayed their usual prayer while the Christians and Jews respectfully prayed in the pews.

Sometime later, the Islamic country where the Imam was from was having trouble between the Muslims and the Christians. But those who attended and remembered this interfaith service lifted it up as a sign of hope and healing, that existing together peacefully can happen. And it was simple to do. All it took was listening to and understanding the ways of the other, and doing so with respect and love.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to not judge one another, but respect how prayer and worship are done differently by others. There is no right or wrong way to give God praise. The main thing is to give that praise freely. For praise brings peace and peace means healing. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 9

Peace builds us up

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. — 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

In Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that in the body of Christ we are to encourage and build each other up. We all have a mission to heal a broken world, each in our own special way. Billy Watkins was the type of church member that every minister wants more of. No matter what needed to be done, Billy was the first there to help. He fixed things before anyone knew they was broken. Food was in the home before anybody knew somebody was hungry or sick.

As a union man, he was first on the strike line advocating for workers.

At Billy's funeral the minister said, "He was always in church on Sunday. Sitting there in the same corner, sleeping." The congregation laughed as the minister went on to tell everybody that he had every right to sleep, for Billy was up before everybody else doing the faithful witness of God's love for those who needed to be reminded of God's love.

As we come closer to the cross, we are reminded today that it is not those who are first, at the head of the table or have the most who will be applauded, but those who always serve the other and do not seek prestige or position for themselves. It is the one who loved the child, fed the hungry, clothed the naked and healed the sick. The community of God's beloved people is comprised of those who are at peace with all of God's beloved and reach out to heal all, even those we call a stranger or an enemy.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, let us meditate on how God is calling each of us in our own special way to love everyone, even our enemies. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 10

Peace settles us down

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.
— Luke 1:78–79

It seems that in the constant negativity, conflict and dangers in our world, our escape route is that of TV binge watching and guzzling wine. Both of these "medications," though, don't heal our souls. They don't ease our troubled minds. These ways of coping can only perpetuate the gloom.

So rather than stay in the gloom self-medicating, it is necessary to seek slivers of light that come from the tender mercy of our God, by looking to God's Word for help and healing, and turning to the psalms for solace. It is when we turn our eyes to God and remember how Jesus walked toward the cross with God ever close to his side that the light we seek begins to appear. The unmanageable starts becoming manageable. Slowly and tenderly the mercy of God fills our lives and the TV and the wine are no longer the balm in Gilead we need. The mercy of our God guides us into the way of peace.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, give us the strength and courage in our struggles to turn toward the tender mercy of God who promises a light to chase away the gloom. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 11

Reprioritizing the parts of our life

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. — Proverbs 3:13–18

Wisdom, understanding, silver, gold, jewels — all you desire — and a long life are all in your right hand. In your left hand are riches and honor. Imagine all of these as the branches of a tree. It would be a pleasantly shaped tree, all balanced with leaves, flowers and fruit. Completing the tree is the trunk through which flows what feeds the tree. It stabilizes the way in which the tree grows.

The psalmist reminds us that God has created all of life to function correctly. Yet our lives have gone awry. There is no peace. Each part of life is at war with every other part. The answer is not more wealth, more power or more weapons. It is not in some being smarter than others. The answer is in reprioritizing our lives and focusing on the very things that truly matter. So we begin with the question: How do the parts of our lives work together to glorify God? For in the glorifying, our lives — and those lives around us — find healing.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to understand the peacefulness of life that is found in the mercy and love of the cross, the tree upon which Jesus was crucified. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, March 12

Waiting for the Lord

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. — Psalm 39:7

The disciples followed Jesus for three years, waiting for the day when Jesus would be publicly declared the Messiah. Some had high hopes. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, hoped they would become princes and sit together with Jesus on the throne. Judas thought he might become the treasurer of the kingdom and have more money than he ever dreamed of. Perhaps other disciples thought they would perform miracles and earn high acclaim. They surely hoped their fortunes would improve and their dreams fulfilled.

What ended up happening was not what they had expected. Their master was arrested, tried, beaten and crucified like a common criminal. How crushed they must have been to realize that all their dreams had been shattered to smithereens. They were shaken to the core. They had expected some type of a reward for their hard work as his followers. They had left behind their families and livelihoods, wandering from town to town with a radical preacher. They had placed their hope in things they could see and grasp.

But the psalmist tells us our hope is in God, not in things, and we need to be patient in waiting for this hope. Lent is a journey filled with things not yet seen. It tests our patience. Yet in the end, when we wait for God, we will find that hope. We will find healing. And at the end of the Lenten journey, beyond the cross and tomb, we will discover through the promise of the resurrection that we will never be shaken no matter what happens in the here and now.

Lord, you are our hope. You are our strength and salvation. Help us to make room in our hearts for you during this Lenten season. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 13

True friendship

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you

friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. — John 15:13–17

True friendships are hard to come by. It is a gift of God, and Jesus offers us his friendship when he says, “I have called you friends.” It is mindboggling to think that Jesus desires to share everything with us. It is friendship drawn on intimacy. Jesus invites us to share in the deep, mutual, abiding love that he shared with God and the Holy Spirit, even before the world began.

His friendship with us cost Jesus everything. His love for us took him to Calvary where he experienced the utter agony of being separated from God. In Christ, the reconciliation of the world with God took place. In offering his friendship, Jesus calls us to love one another. The friendship is not between just the two of us, Jesus Christ and me, but with all who have also been invited through Jesus to form community. It is a community based on the costly grace of Christ who died for us, a community prepared to love and serve each other. It is a community where healing can happen in the most unexpected and amazing ways.

Lord, thank you for calling us to be your friends. May we take your hand in friendship and be worthy of your friendship. Help us to be friends to one another as you have shown us through your love on the cross. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.