

Sermon 7.19.20

Peace like a River

Peace be with you.

I never cease to appreciate all the wonders of Schuylkill County. I am grateful every day for the friendship and generosity of our people and the beauty of our land. This morning I would like to reflect on some of the things I have learned from our rivers as I think they might be helpful today in the flood of change we are trying to swim in. The interesting thing is that the lessons relate a lot to what Jesus and Paul said so clearly to us in the gospels and epistles. It is just that sometimes we have to be in the middle of a crisis to recognize that the life preserver we needed was there all the time.

I took this morning's meditation from a book of modern psalms by J. Phillip Newell who was the Warden of Iona Abbey a center of Benedictine spirituality that is on an island off of Ireland. One of these psalms prays:

In this great river of life

That flows behind me and before me

Let me know that I am carried by you

In this great river of life

That flows around me and through me

Let me know that I carry you

And can reverence you in all that has life.

This prayer is profound for me because it reminds me that I come from a long line, a long river of life that came from generations and generations of people who came together, shared lives filled with hardship and joy and challenge and work and family. And when I am gone, I will be part of that river for my children and their children and their children's children far into the future. What I believe and do today impacts them forever.

I also know with certainty that God is carrying me on this river and also that I carry God with me.

Now let me tell you a story about our river. For several years I was able to take part in an amazing adventure that takes place right here in Schuylkill County. The Schuylkill Sojourn is a journey that takes place on the Schuylkill River the first week of June almost every year. It is a river trek that traces the river from its source, Schuylkill County, to Philadelphia, 135 miles away, where the Schuylkill river joins the Delaware river and goes on to the sea.

On the first morning of the soujourn, over 100 colorful kayaks and canoes set off from Island Park in Schuylkill Haven in a beautiful flotilla and make their way down the Schuylkill River to Philadelphia where they end 7 days later.

Everything looks different on the river. The first time I made the journey it was disorienting because it did not look or feel like the Schuylkill county I knew. It was different and yet also beautiful. It was a landscape of trees and birds and water. Grey herons taking flight and leading us down the center of the river. Places where we would have to drag our boats in years with sparse rain. Rapids and calm, smooth water. Banks filled with trees and vegetation and wildlife, sounds of birds and lapping water. It was a different world, although I knew that just up the river bank was my everyday environment. This seemed like a different universe.

I think this is what finding peace with Jesus feels like. You know you are in the same world you were always in but somehow you feel like you are in a different place. A place where you can relax into the river of life and know that no matter what it will all be ok. That you ARE being carried by God and that you have God with you always and whatever rapids or dry spots you might hit you are never alone.

Peace is an important idea for us. We talk about peace between nations, peace in troubled cities, peace in troubled times but some of our great teachers believe the most important peace is the peace within each of us. One of the great spiritual leaders of the 20th century said that for us to have peace, each of us must be peace. To have peace you must first be peace yourself.

Have you ever thought of that? What would it be like to go through every day with inner peace? Not to become ruffled with the anxieties and frustrations that assail us daily in modern life? What would that feel like? How would it change us? How would it change how we affect others in their lives? If we were less reactive? If we realized that God is always there.

There is wonderful Buddhist teaching story about this. I heard it a long time ago and may not have it quite right but goes something like this....In a village there lived a wise old man who had a farm at the edge of town. The man lived with his son. They worked the small farm together. They did not have much in the way of worldly goods but for some reason people loved to be with the old man. One day a townsman was talking with him and said how lucky he was to have such a strong son to help him with the farm work. The old man smiled and said, we shall see. Then just at harvest time, the son had his leg crushed when a horse fell on him and was unable to move out of bed. So the friend came to him to say how terrible it was that such a thing could happen to him. And the old man smiled and said, we shall see. Later that month the king sent his soldiers to take all the able young men from the village to go to a war from which few would return. And the friend ran to the old man and said what good fortune that his son had been hurt and the old man smiled and said, we shall see.

What would it be like for us if we could take whatever life brought us with a sense of peace that no matter happens to us what God is with us and we do not need to be afraid?

I believe that Jesus was born to bring that kind of peace to us. Isaiah 9:6 told us that “unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” The prince of peace. Jesus certainly did not bring earthly peace between nations in his lifetime or since. Some of the greatest wars have been fought in his name. What if he came to bring us another kind of peace? Not an earthly peace but a personal, spiritual peace?

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is among us. This was confusing to his followers who were looking for a new earthly Jewish kingdom. In Romans Paul tells us about this kingdom of God. In Romans 14:17 Paul says: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” So, the kingdom of God is not an answer to our physical needs but to our spiritual ones. And the kingdom of God comes to us in the Holy spirit and is righteousness, peace and joy.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles and greeted them by saying “Peace be with you”. He said this to them 3 times (John 20:19-20) He had not used this greeting before in the gospels. Jesus came and died to bring us peace. When we use that greeting we are using the actual words of Jesus to bless the other person with true spiritual peace. What a joy to bless another person with such a greeting.

In these times of anxiety, confusion and challenge, it is easy to react constantly to the news of the day. To the fears for tomorrow.

But Jesus has told us that he can bring us peace. If we know that God is carrying us through the rapids on the river; that God is with us every second of our lives, we can find that peace. We can find as Paul described in Philippians 4:7 “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Spend some quiet time with the Prince of Peace this week. Turn off the news and sit in prayer. Say or sing some of your favorite hymns. Breathe in the quiet peace of God. The peace is there for you. The peace is like a river, flowing throughout our lives. Leading us to the God we love.

Peace be with you.