

MY PEACE I GIVE YOU

Easter - 6

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Acts 16:9-15/John 14:23-29

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During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

Acts 16:9-15

Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

John 14:23-29

Jesus is pictured in John's Gospel as giving us something: his Peace, or his Shalom. And in this day and age our American culture, we desire an awful lot and compared to some parts of the world we already have a lot. So, in some sense it is hard to imagine what more can the world give. Indeed, the gift of peace the world has not been able to give totally or universally. Yet, that is God's gift to us in Christ: God's shalom, God's peace, is greater than anything we can desire or imagine.

For it is tied to God's vision of Sabbath and Jubilee. It encompasses justice and peace among all people. It demands respect for the dignity of every human being.

Shalom, God's peace, means becoming a people who seek and serve Christ for the good of all, loving our neighbors as ourselves. It means no longer asking the question, Who is my neighbor?

In the indivisible totality of his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus embraces and lives God's vision of Shalom for all people. Jesus gives us this Peace. That is, Jesus makes us stewards of God's shalom. It is his parting gift as we approach the day of his Ascension on Thursday of this week.

Just so we won't forget, and so our hearts won't be troubled at his returning to God, Jesus and the Father will send an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will teach us everything, and remind us of all that He has said to us. We are not alone in being stewards of his parting gift. The Holy Spirit will teach us and remind us of this vision of Shalom for all people.

It is like the song of the Psalmist: may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of the God of Shalom. May all the peoples praise God! May all the nations be glad and sing for Joy! May God's ways be known upon earth, and God's saving health among all nations.

This vision runs all the way through to the very end of the Bible in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine: There will be a New Jerusalem whose gates are open and never closed to anyone or anything. It is a vision of opening our doors to peoples

and nations beyond ourselves. And through it all runs the river of the water of Life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Beside this river is a tree with all kinds of fruit.
And the leaves of this tree are for the healing of nations:
no HMOs;
no Cost Containment;
no Co-pay; no troop deployments;
no carpet bombing; no coercion by violence,
no threats of domination.

Just pluck the leaves of the tree and be healed.

It is a new It is a new kind of reconciliation.
It is a new kind of health care delivery system.
It is a new kind of Peace.

It is God's own Shalom.

When Jesus says, Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, he is commissioning us to be those who bring this vision of God's Shalom to all people and to all the nations. In giving us this parting gift, Jesus invites us to bathe in this river that flows through the New Jerusalem. Do we come here today to bathe in this river bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb?

Lydia does. She who sells purple cloth, expensive, royal, purple cloth, sold only to those who can afford it. She is an entrepreneur, a successful merchant! Lydia and the women of Philippi are down by the river at a place of prayer outside the gates of the city. God opens Lydia's heart, just as we pray for God to open our hearts; to pour into our hearts such love towards us, that we, loving Christ in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire.

Lydia's heart is opened, and Paul helps God to pour in this love we pray for. Lydia and the women welcome this foreign missionary who interrupts their prayers and shares with them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are baptized in the river. Lydia and her entire household are

baptized. Lydia is the first European to be baptized! Lydia's may be the first gentile house, that is non-Jewish, that Paul has ever entered. Paul had read the law in scripture and had been taught to avoid any contact with people like Lydia. Paul had been instructed and believed he should bar the gates and shut off the flow of the water of life to any and all gentiles. Paul had been taught not to be seen in public with women, let alone gentile women. Paul is making a leap of faith. Paul is entering into a life of Shalom, God's peace that passes all understanding.

Just as Peter had entered the home of Cornelius the Centurion, Paul is welcomed into Lydia's household. And Lydia makes a leap of faith in offering this Jewish missionary the hospitality of her home. All distinctions of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable are passing away. Healing is indeed taking place, down by the river.

God is doing new things through Paul and Lydia. This healing and these new things exceed all that we can desire or even imagine!

All of this comes about because Paul has a dream, a vision. He imagines he can go to Macedonia. He goes expecting to find a man there, but surprise: he finds Lydia. And as a result, the world is changed down by the River of the Water of Life. Down by the river of the water of life, all things are possible. It is even possible that we, too, can be changed.

We, too, can lay aside long held assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices. Like Paul, we too can lay aside old understandings of the Bible. Like Paul, we too can have the vision to go to people beyond the four walls of our church, beyond the boundaries of our community, beyond state lines, beyond the United States of America, and let God's ways be known upon the earth, God' saving health among all nations.

We may notice the location of all this activity: Jerusalem and Macedonia, two pieces of God's real estate still under dispute and heated contention. We are invited to imagine God' Shalom, God's peace, even in Jerusalem and Macedonia.

We are those people who can imagine all of this and more because we have these stories. Paul and Lydia had to be scared silly down by that riverside, breaking with all convention. Lydia is baptized only because she and Paul were able to suspend their understanding of what their cultures and the Bible had taught them.

They were willing to suspend all the rules, regulations, and customs that governed their world. They had to let go and sing the new song God was calling them to sing. And they had to open their hearts and minds to see everything in a new light.

That light is the light of the Lamb. That light is the light of the Paschal candle. Saint John the Divine imagines a day when all the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring it glory.

Paul and Lydia were not extraordinary people. They were just like us. Can we imagine all of this and more? Can we see ourselves opening our hearts and minds to strangers? Can we imagine old hurts and old wounds being healed by the banks of the river of the city of God? Can we open our hearts to let the Light of Christ shine into all its dark corners and drive all fear and anxiety from our midst?

Can we allow ourselves to be drawn closer and deeper into the world of God's Shalom? Jesus wants to give us all of this. Jesus wants to give us all of this and more than we can either desire or imagine. Listen as he calls us: My own shalom I give to you; I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Peace I leave with you. It is yours to have and to give to the rest of the world.

Amen.