

John 20:19-31
Judges 6
Psalm 122

“Peace Be with You”

April 8, 2018

We read Judges 6 as our Old Testament lesson.

There are several examples in the Old Testament of God declaring “shalom” or “peace be to you” to his people.

It is frequently a response to the fear that something terrible is about to happen.

The idea of peace that it communicates is broader than just the absence of conflict.

To define peace as the lack of conflict is to make it a negative concept.

But peace includes an active sense of God’s powerful presence with his people.

Judges 6 provides a useful lens for understanding the OT concept of peace.

The Midianites had been raiding Israel for seven years,
plundering the harvests due to Israel’s sin.

But when Israel cried out to the LORD,

God sent his angel to appear to Gideon,
the youngest son of the smallest clan of Manasseh.

And the angel of the LORD declared

“Yahweh is with you, O mighty man of valor”

And he promised that Gideon would smite the Midianites,
rescuing Israel from their enemies.

But Gideon was not content with hearing the word of the LORD.

He wanted to see a sign.

So the angel of God gave him a sign—
and consumed the sacrifice with fire from the rock.

When he saw this, Gideon declared,

“Alas, O Lord Yahweh, for now I have seen the angel of Yahweh face to face.”

But God replied, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.”

Then Gideon built an altar there to Yahweh and called it

“Yahweh Shalom”—the LORD is Peace

As long as God is absent from his people, there is no peace.

Peace comes only when God dwells with his people,

when God visits his people bringing judgment against their enemies,
and giving his people rest.

Gideon has seen the angel of the LORD face to face,

and yet God has spoken peace to him.

God has promised to be present with him—

indeed, in 6:34, “The Spirit of Yahweh clothed Gideon.”

The Holy Spirit came upon Gideon to lead the people of God to victory—and to peace.

Here is the way that John organizes his gospel:

John 1:19-2:12 -- A seven-day sequence (1:29, 35, 43, and 2:1) that concludes with the wedding at Cana.

John 2:13-4:45 -- The Passover of the Jews was at hand (2:13) and the Galileans welcomed him because they had seen all that he did at the Feast (4:45). The passage concludes with the return to Cana.

John 5 -- "After this there was a feast of the Jews..." (5:1)

John 6 -- "Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand." (6:4)

John 7-8 -- "Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand" (7:2)

John 9:1-10:21 -- "Now it was a Sabbath day..." (9:14)

John 10:22-42 -- "At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem" (10:22)

John 11-19 -- "Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand" (11:55, 12:1, 13:1, etc.)

John 20 -- "Now on the first day of the week..." (20:1, 19, 26)

In other words, *every* event in the Gospel of John is connected to some feast. Therefore we should see that John is highlighting the importance of the first day/eighth day in chapter 20.

John 20 is the conclusion to John's gospel.

Chapter 21 serves as something of an epilogue,
a bookend to the prologue found in John 1:1-18.

At the end of chapter 1 Jesus receives the Holy Spirit.

At the end of chapter 20 Jesus gives the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist declared that Jesus is the Son of God in 1:34.

John tells us in 20:31 that these things have been written
that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Nathaniel believed in Jesus simply because Jesus said that he saw him under the fig tree
in 1:49, and Jesus told him "you will see greater things than these."

Thomas believes in Jesus only when he sees the greater thing in 20:28,
and yet Jesus speaks then of the greater blessing
for those who have not seen and yet believe.

And not accidentally, John 1:29-2:1 is designed as a seven-day story.

On the first day John is baptizing at the Jordan;

On the next day—the second—the Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism;

on the next day—the third day—John's disciples follow Jesus;

on the next day—the fourth day—Philip and Nathaniel follow Jesus;

and on the third day—the seventh day—Jesus turns the water to wine.

In other words, John's gospel opens with a week of seven days.

For the rest of his gospel, every major event occurs
in the context of a sabbath or feast.

And now in John 20 we begin a new week.

The first day of the new creation dawns in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The second half of John 20 has two parts:

Jesus' meeting with the ten disciples on the evening of the first day of the week—
the evening of the resurrection (verses 19-25)

and Jesus' meeting with the eleven (including Thomas) eight days later (verses 26-29)

John structures these two meetings in parallel through his use of the time stamp

(The first day of the week—v19, and after eight days—v26)

and by Jesus' opening words to his disciples both times:

“Peace be with you.”

These words echo his promise in 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

These words had referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit in verse 26:

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,
he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance
all that I have said to you.”

Jesus promised that when he left to go to the Father, his peace would remain behind.

Now here in John 20, as Jesus meets with his disciples

for the first time since the resurrection,

everything he says to them has to do with this promise.

1. The Evening of the First Day: The Forgiveness of Sins and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (v19-23)

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews,^[c] Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

And so when our Lord was raised from the dead on the first day of the week,

he came that evening to meet with his disciples.

They were meeting in secret, with the doors locked—

fearing that they would be the next targets of the Jewish leadership.

Especially since the rulers of the Jews believed that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body,
they anticipated some sort of crackdown.

The Midianites were closing in.

But Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

But unlike the Angel of the LORD, Jesus showed them no miraculous sign.
He showed them a sign far more powerful than any mere miracle.
He showed them his hands and his side.

For this was no phantom or ghost.

How did he make it through the locked doors?

We do not know.

But he did.

This was the resurrected Messiah.

He had suffered for the sins of the world,
and now he was returning to the Father.

Let me state this emphatically.

This was no “ordinary” resurrection.

That may sound odd.

Resurrection from the dead is hardly a common occurrence.

But Elijah and Elisha had raised the dead.

Jesus raised several people from the dead,
and after him the apostles raised the dead.

A century ago the idea of resurrection was mocked by unbelievers
and liberal theology attempted to explain the resurrection away
as a figment of the apostolic imagination.

But today most unbelievers have no problem with the idea
that perhaps something strange happened—
and perhaps Jesus did rise from the dead.

But so what?

In a postmodern world anything is possible.

When Elijah and Elisha raised the dead, it was remarkable,
but there was nothing earthshaking about it.

Even the raising of Lazarus was just an “ordinary” resurrection.

It was something odd and unusual, but it didn’t change the course of history.

Lazarus doesn’t come out of the grave saying, “Peace be with you!”

But when Jesus meets with his disciples,
he shows them his hands and his side.

These are the wounds that he bore for us.

This resurrection is different from all other resurrections,
because Jesus is the Lord.

In the midst of the disciples’ fear and wonder,
he brings joy and peace.

“Peace be with you.”

As he had promised them in John 14, he now gives to them his peace.

“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

They will be his witnesses—they will do works greater than his—
because they will bring the message of his work to the nations.

When Jesus ascends to the Father,

the kingdom of God consists of a couple hundred faithful disciples.

But through their apostolate—through their preaching—
the kingdom of God will become thousands, and tens of thousands.
And as that preaching has spread to the ends of the earth,
that kingdom today numbers in the tens, or hundreds of millions.
“Peace be with you.”

You may think that the Midianites are coming.
You may think that the Jews are coming for you next.
(And you’re right—they are!)
But as I equipped Gideon with my Spirit a thousand years ago,
so I am equipping you with my Spirit now.
And so with the commission comes the power to fulfill the commission.
And through his breath, he communicates to them the Holy Spirit.

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

This is not the work of the Spirit in regeneration—because they are already saved.
Rather, this is the gift of the Spirit to equip them as servants in his kingdom.
They are called as his instruments to bring salvation to his people
and judgment to the nations.
Therefore Jesus says “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven;
if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

As Gideon had been clothed with the Spirit to deliver Israel and destroy Midian,
so also the anointed leaders of Christ’s church are given the Spirit
to forgive the sins of God’s people
and to withhold forgiveness from those who would destroy the church.

This is not to say that the elders are infallible.

The story of Gideon ends rather miserably.
Gideon winds up leading the people back into idolatry.
And sad to say, the elders of the church have frequently done the same.
But in John 20, Christ gives the apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit
so that they might proclaim the forgiveness of sins to the people.

This is why we have a declaration of pardon every week.

Each week I do that which Jesus called me to do.
I forgive your sins.
No mere mortal could ever claim to do this on his own authority.
In myself, *I do not* have the authority to forgive your sins.

But Jesus here plainly sends the apostles to do two things:

- 1) forgive the sins of his people
- 2) withhold forgiveness from those who seek to destroy his church.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Some people want to flip this around.
They say that what Jesus *really* means
is that the apostles are supposed to forgive those whom God has already forgiven.
But that's *not* what Jesus says.

Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 18 –
“whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask,
it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I among them.”

(It's worth noting that Jesus is talking about church discipline.
We sometimes quote the “two or three gathered in my name”
to refer to worship –
but that's *not* what Jesus is talking about.
Jesus is saying that the disciplinary action of the church
is the disciplinary action of Jesus himself.)

The obvious question is: *but what about when the church gets it wrong?!*
Jesus talks about *that* in the book of Revelation.
He warns that a church may cease to be a church –
that he will come and remove its lampstand.

If those who *claim* to act on behalf of Jesus *get it wrong* –
then they will face a severe judgment!

So, for instance, if someone came to MCPC –
claiming to be wrongly excommunicated by another church –
we wouldn't just ignore that judgment –
we would honor it while we investigated the matter.
If the other church was wrong, then we would urge them to rescind their judgment
and if they refused, then we would rescind it.

2. Eight Days Later: Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Have Believed (v24-29)

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin,^[d] was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

The second part of our text today then turns to what it means to believe in Jesus.

You see, Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

And when he heard about Jesus' first appearance, he doubted.
"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails,
and place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side,
I will never believe."
But Jesus makes him wait a week.

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

It is only eight days later—on the first day of the week—that Jesus appears to them again.
Again it is on the first day of the week.
Again they are together in a locked room.
Again Jesus gets inside the locked room.
The only difference is that this time, Thomas is with them.

You cannot read about Thomas without thinking back to Gideon.
Judges 6-8 goes on to tell the story of how Gideon broke down the altar of Baal
and became the instrument of God in rescuing Israel from Midian.
But this mighty man of valor is most famous for his insistence that God provide signs.
Gideon twice put out his fleece, asking God for confirmation of his promise.
God, if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground,
then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand.
And then after that happened:
"Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew"
Gideon wanted God to confirm by a sign that he was indeed the appointed deliverer.
He often is chastised for demanding a sign,
but God did not rebuke him.
He was about to go into battle against incredible odds.
There was no way that he could win unless God himself was with him.

In that light, Thomas also becomes a more sympathetic figure.
After all, Jesus had told the ten, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."
To do what?
To challenge the Jewish authorities by preaching the gospel of a risen Messiah.
To challenge the Roman authorities by declaring that Jesus is Lord – not Caesar!

Jesus—whom he had watched die by the hand of those Jewish and Roman authorities.
I, for one, have no desire to rebuke Thomas for his doubts.

But Jesus came to his disciples, and once more says to them "Peace be with you."
Once more he declares that the Peace of God has come.

As Isaiah had declared in Isaiah 40,
“Tell Jerusalem that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.”
Jesus comes to his people and declares that Peace has come.

And then he turns to Thomas (read v27)

Thomas’s answer was to confess that Jesus is “my Lord and my God.”
He had seen Lazarus raised from the dead,
but his response then was simply to be impressed with Jesus.
But when he sees the resurrected Christ,
he believes all that Jesus had said concerning himself.
Truly this Jesus is both Lord and God.

Why did John include this section on Thomas?

Wouldn’t verses 19-23 be sufficient?
John understands that many will sit in Thomas’s place.
How can I believe?
I’ve never seen his hands and his side.
How can I know that this is true?
I want to see this for myself!!
When I was in college, I wanted to see signs.
I wanted heaven to open and God to give me a direct message that this was true.
It never happened.

John’s point here in verses 24-29 is that what God did for Gideon and Thomas
is not the normal mode of revelation.
Indeed, Jesus’ response to Thomas is really designed for us.

Jesus speaks not simply for Thomas’s sake, but for those of us at a distance:
(Read v29)
John’s gospel is written with the assumption that very few people will get the direct,
immediate revelation.
Most of us will hear the preaching of the gospel:
the proclamation of the good news of what Jesus has done.

We walk by faith—not by sight.

And Jesus declares his blessing upon those who have not seen and yet have believed.
Indeed, Paul will say that faith comes by hearing,
as the apostolic preaching goes forth to the ends of the earth.
John himself concludes this (30-31).

3. That You May Believe – and Have Life in His Name (v30-31)

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

