He Comes to Bring You Peace
Saint John 20:19-23

Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Those are familiar words to Lutheran ears. We often hear them at the beginning of the sermon. You will hear them from your new pastor Sunday after Sunday as he steps into this pulpit to do what today he is being ordained to do, namely, to preach the Gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself making peace through the blood of the cross.

Peace. That is the Lord's first word to His disciples on Easter evening. He comes to them as they were locked up in fear. No deadbolt could keep Him out. Death would not imprison the Lord Jesus in its icy grip. The boulder that blocked the mouth of the tomb was powerless to keep Jesus in that cave of death. Locked doors are no problem for Him. So Jesus stands in the midst of the eleven. Huddled together in fear, fear that is the by-product of unbelief; they thought to protect themselves against the Jews. Now the Risen Lord triumphs over their unbelief. He is alive and not as a ghost or phantom but in His body—the body born of Mary and nailed to the cross. The sheep cannot find their way to the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd finds His sheep.

It is the real Jesus and He speaks a real word. He says "Peace be with you." What kind of peace is this? It is not the peace that the world gives. It is not the absence of outbreaks of terrorism or the cessation of war in Iraq. It is not the seductive counterfeits that parade under the labels like "peace of mind." No, the peace that Jesus gives comes with His pierced hands and spear-opened side. The peace that our Lord extends to His disciples is forged out on the cross with spikes and a spear. It is peace made with hammer and nails. We know that war is bloody but so is this peace.

Jesus speaks this word of peace to His disciples not once but twice. With His first word of peace, He greets them and sets their fearful hearts at rest. With His second word of peace, He sends them. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." The disciples do not remain secluded in their hideaway. Jesus with His Word and Spirit sends them. He breathes on them. His breath is the breath of God. Just God breathed into the nostrils of Adam so that he became a living being, so now God's Son breathes His Spirit into these men living in the shadow of death. God breathed life into that valley of death in Ezekiel's vision and those bones were clothed with muscle, sinew and skin and were resurrected. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and by the breath of his mouth all their hosts" said the Psalmist (Ps. 33:6). Jesus' breath and His words give life in the place of death. He resuscitates the morbid-bound disciples
with the fresh air of His resurrection. They are made apostles-sent ones. They are ambassadors of the Lord. Of them the words of Isaiah 52 ring true: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Is. 52:7 NIV).

That sending did not stop on Easter evening. The Lord still sends men to do what He gave His apostles to do: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Apart from the forgiveness of sins there is no peace with God. Apart from the forgiveness of sins there is only God's wrath and condemnation. There is no escaping that reality. Our legs are not long enough to run from Him and our arms are too short to push Him away. Clever as we may be, there is no place to hide from Him. He does not cease to exist if we do not believe in Him. Apart from His Gospel, there is only fear, turmoil and unrest.

So that you might receive the Lord's peace, blood-purchased peace in the forgiveness won at Calvary, Jesus sends you a pastor, a shepherd. He is the Lord's gift to you. Certainly on a human level, the man that you will know in a few minutes as Pastor Sonntag is a gifted man. He is a man of keen intellect and deep learning. And I could go on to rehearse the many fine qualities and characteristics that soon-to-be-Pastor Sonntag brings to your congregation. But that would be to miss the point. In our text, John does recount the qualities of the disciples who would be made into apostles. There is nothing reliable in them. The focus is rather on Jesus. He is the One who sends these men to serve as His instruments, to do His work.

John tells us that the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. They saw with their own eyes His wounds. His wounds are His credentials—the marks of His passion and death. By His wounds they knew that it was really Jesus. We, too, rejoice in the wounds of our Savior. They are the very doors that open to us the mercy of God. His wounds are the fountain and source of our salvation. The water and blood that stream from Jesus' broken side wash away our sin, cleansing us from all unrighteousness. "Rich wounds yet visible above" as the hymn puts.

Now the redemption obtained by the wounds of Christ is delivered. This afternoon, Holger Sonntag is put into the office of the holy ministry for the work of delivering that precious cargo of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. It is an office that the Lord Jesus Christ has acquired by His holy blood. Dr. Luther put it like this: "From His wounds indeed flow the Sacraments. He paid dearly that men might have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the Sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God's Word and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office" (AE 46:219).

Salvation does not remain a secret, hidden away back there in history out of our reach. Salvation was done and redemption was achieved in the atoning death of God's own Lamb. Now that treasure is delivered. That is why our Lord Jesus sent His apostles establishing the office of the holy ministry. Again listen to Luther. This time from the
Large Catechism: "The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have all been in vain. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused His Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He gives us the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation."

There are gifts to be delivered. That is what God puts pastors in His church to do. In the medieval church, the ministry was deformed into a priesthood that had as its function the work of sacrificing the Mass. In our day there are those who see the ministry as the work of managing, organizing, or providing therapy. Neither of these are these views are from the New Testament. The ministry of the New Testament is that of an ambassador. An ambassador is one who is authorized and sent by the Lord Jesus Christ to represent Him for He says "He who hears you, hears Me." An ambassador doesn't make things up as he goes along. He speaks and does what he has been given to speak and do by the one who sent him. Remember the words of the Small Catechism: "...when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command....this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself."

In just a few minutes, Brother Holger you will be placed in this office to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. You will be placed in this office to baptize, to distribute the Lord's body and blood, to forgive and retain sins. Your mouth will be mouth of the Good Shepherd. Your hands are His hands. His Word, the only word you are given to proclaim. The message that you bring as God's ambassador is that of peace in the forgiveness of sins. You will be Christ's ambassador, His servant, declaring heaven's peace come to earth just like the Christmas angels did over Bethlehem's prairies. You will stand in this pulpit and speak those words of grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and troubled consciences will be relieved and set at peace by God's own absolution. You will stand at this altar and declare with the body and blood of Christ, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." You will speak the words of the Benediction, "The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace." These words are not a pious wish but God's own Word that says what it gives and gives what it says.

Ordination puts you, Holger, under orders from the Lord Himself to speak His words faithfully. The peace you will proclaim is not that of the compromising peace of the false prophets who say "Peace, peace where there is no peace." Your task is to preach the peace of the cross, the peace of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There is a wonderful episode in the novel, The Hammer of God where the young Pastor Fridfeldt after being frustrated by the futile attempts have a successful ministry by his own devices, comes to understand that the ministry is finally not about the man but about Jesus Christ. Then Pastor Fridfeldt exclaims "can anything be greater than to be a pastor in God's church?" It is a great life. What greater joy can there be then being used as God's servant in delivering His gifts to needy sinners?

God makes no promises that the life and work of a pastor will be easy or without pain. You do not know what joys and disappointments, what happiness or heartbreak the future
will bring as you serve Christ's holy people. Your confidence and the confidence of the people that today God is giving into your care is only in steadfast mercy of the Lord who has sent you. He says "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so send you." That is enough for both pastor and congregation.

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