



LESSONS

**MALACHI 3:1-4 OR
BARUCH 5:1-9
ST. LUKE 1:68-79 (78)
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11
ST. LUKE 3:1-6**

**BIBLE IN 90 DAYS TEXT
ROMANS 5:1-11**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**STIR UP OUR HEARTS,
LORD GOD, TO PREPARE
THE WAY OF YOUR ONLY
SON. BY HIS COMING
GIVE TO ALL THE PEOPLE
OF THE WORLD
KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR
SALVATION; THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST, OUR
SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH
YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

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God's work. Our hands.

Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday of Advent

Date: December 6, 2009

Sermon Title: Peace with God

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, we've come to the end of the run. Our Bible in 90 Days readers will finish up their cover-to-cover journey of the Bible this week. We are scheduled to read the last verse on Thursday – some of us are already there, and some of us will take a few more weeks to get there. But we've had a very rich experience together, and in some ways are reading the New Testament in a much different manner than we every have before.

At the beginning of the project, the creator of "The Bible in 90 Days" described it as a cross-country trip. Only rather than taking an airplane from New York to Los Angeles, we were driving all the way through the story of the Bible. On these Sunday morning's, I have been stopping along the way for 13 weeks, and preaching on a text we just read. I hope that, for those of you who haven't been reading each day, it has at least seemed like a train trip, where we stop at the station in each town to take a look around. And I hope that perhaps it will raise your interest in taking this journey for yourselves some year.

Our lesson this morning is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. The Apostle Paul was the church's first great missionary. He was a Jewish religious insider – a trained Pharisee, to be precise. But he met the risen Christ, and it completely turned his life around. He went from capturing Christians and bringing them back to Jerusalem to be tried for heresy, to travelling from town to town, starting new Christian congregations. And he wrote letters – some to churches he had visited, and some to churches he hoped to visit. One of his most famous letters was written to the Christians who were living in Rome.

As we take a look at a section from this letter, I want to ask you a question. What would a world at peace look like? Some picture an absence of armed conflict. In a world where there seem to be wars and violence on every continent, perhaps peace is the opposite of that: perhaps peace has to do with countries existing side-by-side in mutual respect and appreciation. When thinking about peace, some picture a family that loves and enjoys one another. Every human family has its challenges and struggles; perhaps peace is the opposite of that: perhaps peace has to do with family members who love each other, and who do nothing but support and encourage one another. When thinking about peace, some imagine a day when all the people in the world will be well fed and healthy. In a world where far too many parents put their children to bed hungry, perhaps peace is the opposite of that: perhaps peace is when all children have enough to eat, and are physically well.

Each of these, of course, is a dimension of peace. But it's not the kind of peace that Paul has in mind in the lesson we read from his letter to the Romans just a few minutes ago. Paul is talking about a different kind of peace – a deeper

peace. Paul is talking about peace with God. Truth is: being at peace with God is a rare experience in our world.

The problem goes back to the very beginning. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve depart from God's command, and decide that they will choose for themselves what to eat and what not to eat. Until this point, they had been at peace with God. But once their innocence was lost, and they realized that they were naked, they hid. Not necessarily so that God wouldn't see them unclothed, but in the hope that God wouldn't see the naked truth about them. They had disobeyed. They had made themselves unworthy. They had distanced themselves from God. They had rejected God's role in their lives. Now, when they considered God, they no longer thought about peace and joy and delight – they were ashamed, so much so that they hid themselves.

This ancient story has much to say about the human condition. It is true: If we are insightful about God's will, and honest about our own lives, we too end up ashamed of how far short we fall from God's expectations of us. Even the best of us (or, to be more accurate, those of us who appear to be the best) can't seem to live up to our high calling as followers of Jesus Christ. We are far too focused on ourselves. We are far too reluctant with our generosity. We are far too timid in speaking out on God's behalf. We too, when we are honest about who we are, find ourselves ashamed in the presence of God. Certainly not at peace!

And so it is to people like you and me that the Apostle Paul speaks, when he says that those who are justified by faith have peace with God. What he means is that if our relationship with God is based on our personal faithfulness, we will always be anxious. We will wonder if we've done enough good. We will wonder if we've given enough of our lives over to Christ. We will wonder if we have believed enough of the right doctrines. If our relationship with God is based on our personal faithfulness, we will always be anxious.

But if our relationship with God is based on faith – in other words: based on what Christ has done for us – we will have peace. We will live with the awareness that God's love for us is not dependent on our worthiness. Instead, God's love for us is rooted in grace: given to us as a free and undeserved gift. And so our peace with God is certain, because it is based on the faithfulness of God, and God's never-ending love for us.

That is the truth that lies at the heart of Biblical Christianity. That is what distinguishes Christianity from almost every other religious expression in our world. At the heart of our faith is the belief that Christ has done for us what we can't do for ourselves, and that is why we are able to be at peace with God.

This is the message at the heart of the opening words in today's first lesson. But Paul quickly moves on from there. Having established that we are at peace with God, he then goes on to say that because of this peace, we can endure anything the world throws at us. It is a passage that I'm sure you have heard before – perhaps many times. Let me read it to you again. Paul writes:

"... suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts..."

Paul doesn't encourage us, here, to long for suffering. But he does say that when the most important part of our lives is in good order – our relationship with God – then nothing else can be strong enough to destroy us. As a matter of fact, even the worst of our experiences can be used for good, as God allows our suffering to become endurance, which produces character, and that allows us to live in hope; a hope that will never disappoint us because it rests in God's love.

And how do we gain that? How do we become the kind of people who experience endurance, character and hope in the midst of our suffering? We go back to the beginning of Paul's words and remember that whenever we try to make this happen on our own, we end up in anxiety and despair. But if we let God do it for us – if we let God be our peace – then even our hardest experiences can be a source of strength.

When we are right with God, we are given a strength and courage that comes in no other way. That's why Martin Luther was able to carry on the ministry that he did: not worried about being put to death, but willing to risk everything in order to reform the church. That's why people like Bishop Desmond Tutu and Lutheran Pastor T. Simon Farisani were able to stand up against the apartheid South African government: not worried about what would happen to them, but willing to do whatever it took for their people to have freedom. That's why our own Bishop Mark Hanson has been such a steady and faithful leader through the challenges the ELCA has faced this year: not worried about church politics, but willing to continue leading us into a deeper experience of the good news of Jesus Christ. What is true for these Christians is true for you and me as well: we can find ourselves willing to serve – even willing to suffer – because when we are right with God, everything else becomes secondary. That is the gift of the Apostle Paul's insight in this morning's lesson, and that is the gift of our Christian faith.

When we are at peace with God, there is nothing that causes us to fear. Because suffering brings endurance, endurance brings character, and character produces hope. Luther, Tutu, Farisani, Bishop Hanson... these faithful saints knew this to be true. Do we?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 6, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{3:1} In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{3:1} Ἐν τει δὲ πεντεκαιδεκάτω τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, ἡγεμονεύοντος Ποντίου Πιλάτου τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ τετραρχούντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρρδου, Φιλίππου δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ τετραρχούντος τῆς Ἰτουραίας καὶ Τραχωνίτιδος χώρας, καὶ Λυσανίου τῆς Ἀβιληνῆς τετραρχούντος, ² ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Ἄννα καὶ Καϊάφα, ἐγένετο ῥῆμα θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν Ζαχαρίου υἱὸν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ. ³ καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς πᾶσαν [τὴν] περιχωρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς φεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, ⁴ ὡς γέγραπται ἐν βίβλῳ λόγων Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου· φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>
ⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:1-6, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τριβούς αὐτοῦ· ⁵ πᾶσα φάραγξ πληρωθήσεται καὶ πᾶν ῥος καὶ βουνὸς ταπεινωθήσεται, καὶ σταί τὰ σκολιὰ εἰς εὐθείαν καὶ αἱ τραχεῖαι εἰς ὁδοὺς λείας· ⁶ καὶ ψεται πᾶσα σὰρξ τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. ⁱⁱⁱ

“The Bible in 90 Days” Lesson:

^{5:1} Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

^{iv}

Scheduled Readings for “The Bible in 90 Days” (9/13/2009 - 12/12/2009)

Date	Begin Reading At	Sermon Based On
9/13	Genesis 1:1	Genesis 1:1-19
9/20	Leviticus 1:1	Exodus 16:2-15
9/27	Deuteronomy 23:12	Deuteronomy 6:1-9
10/4	1 Samuel 28:20	Joshua 24:1-3, 14-18
10/11	1 Chronicles 1:1	1 Kings 3:5-12
10/18	Nehemiah 13:15	Nehemiah 1:4-11a
10/25	Psalms 89:14	Job 38:1-11
11/1	Isaiah 14:1	Psalms 104:24-34, 35b
11/8	Jeremiah 33:23	Isaiah 25:6-9
11/15	Daniel 9:1	Ezekiel 2:1-5
11/22	Matthew 26:57	Micah 6:1-8
11/29	Acts 6:8	John 20:19-31
12/6	Hebrews 1:1	Romans 5:1-11

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:1-6, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

^{iv} Romans 5:1-11, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).