

Peace of God

Recently I was talking with someone who had been a chaplain at a hospital in New York City that's located in a particularly tough area. It also has a psychiatric ward, so there is plenty for a chaplain to do. There's a room where chaplains can sleep at night when on call. Given the nature of the work, sleep is often difficult. My friend learned to settle himself down so that he *could* sleep by reciting a verse to himself over and over, a verse we just heard from the Gospel of John. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

What does the peace of God mean? Peace is not simply the absence of strife. That's a negative definition, as though strife and war are the normal condition. That may be the world's way, but the peace of God is very much a presence, not an absence.

We get a glimpse of God's peace in the blessing at the end of the Rite I service, which begins with a verse from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." From that we know that God's peace is more than we can comprehend. It passes all understanding.

My own search for that peace drew me many years ago to New Melleray Abbey, the Cistercian or Trappist monastery near Dubuque. A cornerstone of their guest house is inscribed with two words from Psalm 46: Be still. The entire verse is, "Be still and know that I am God." It's a reminder of the Cistercians' thousand-year-old tradition of contemplative prayer, resting in the presence of God.

The contemporary practice of mindfulness is a secular version of that, focusing on the moment and what is going on inside one's self. Both practices have physical and psychological benefits. In addition to those benefits, however, the question remains: what does the peace of *God* look like?

Jesus gives us a clue when he talks about the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. "Advocate" and the older term "Paraclete" both mean the same thing. They are derived from the Latin and Greek words, respectively, for one who is called alongside us, one who goes with us. Significantly, in John's Gospel this is the only place where the phrase "Holy Spirit" appears. It is the Holy Spirit who walks alongside us, teaching us all things and reminding us of all that Jesus said.

In other words, the Holy Spirit grounds us in God. That is where true peace resides, where our spirit rests in God's Spirit. Unlike the world's peace that is an absence of strife, God's peace is very much a presence, a place where we live out of our deepest self, the person whom God knows us to be. That's why the verse from John worked so well for my chaplain friend. All of the pain and suffering he was witnessing did not go away. Instead, it was taken up in the life of God, a God who suffers with us. Having given the suffering up to God, the chaplain's heart was no longer troubled and he could sleep.

How do we find the peace of God? In ways so simple that they are hard to accomplish. One is reading the Bible slowly, meditatively, chewing on the words – “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” as one of our prayers says. Or simply repeating a word or phrase over and over, as the chaplain did. Or walking meditatively through God’s good creation. All of these ways take time and intention, which is why they are so hard to do.

This week, take some time to seek the peace of God. Jesus gives it to us freely if we seek it. The Holy Spirit teaches us how to do it. This week, do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Instead, let the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

[Easter 6: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29.]