

Today our Easter journey with the resurrection Jesus nears its end. This Thursday is the feast of the Ascension which marks the end of Jesus' appearances to his disciples and in a couple of weeks we'll be celebrating Pentecost and the beginning of the Church's ministry.

You will remember that Jesus' ministry started after his time of prayer in the desert and his temptation. In Matthew's account we read, "the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'" Today we heard in the reading from Revelation, "In the spirit, the angel carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God." Two visions from a great high mountain, and yet how different they are. What Jesus did between his temptations and his ascension changed everything.

I found myself very torn as I prepared this sermon. I love the vision of the holy city and want to talk about that, but I also find Jesus' promise to give us peace but not as the world gives it, a deeply important message to unpack. So rather than make a choice, I am going to try to do both.

Let's start with Jesus. What is the peace that the world gives? Here of course Jesus is, as usual, contrasting "the world" with the reign of God.

I think there are at least three answers. First, in the normal course of human affairs we make peace with each other by ganging up on someone else. You can see that very easily in the current presidential race – we gain unity and peace with one another by blaming someone else, whether it's Mexicans, Moslems or Wall Street, for all our problems. Jesus was the ultimate scapegoat. He shone a spotlight on this very human behavior, showing us that caught in the sin matrix we blame, persecute and even kill, innocent victims who are not at all to blame for our woes. The peace we gain from blaming and uniting with one another is always at someone else's expense.

Instead of that, Jesus makes it possible for us to find our peace with one another in Christ – in the body of Christ of which we are members and he is the head. We are called to make peace with one another and be reconciled to God through our membership in Christ and the reign of God. We don't need to have a person or a group of people to hate or blame in order for us to have peace together. This one can be difficult for us to remember. Although we are too sophisticated to think we are better than Moslems or Buddhists, it's easy for us to slip back into the cultural ways of the world and start thinking that somehow as Episcopalians we are better than Baptists or people who go to the Church of the Nazarene. We don't need to be better than anyone else, we don't need to blame or attack anyone else in order to be at peace.

The second peace that the world gives comes from mood-altering substances or behaviors. I suspect we all have them – whether it's playing solitaire, watching television, going shopping, or eating, drinking or taking drugs – we all do things which calm us and, for a while, help us feel peaceful. And those who sell products keep trying to persuade us that we'd have even more peace and joy than we do now if only we would take a river cruise, or buy life insurance or a new car.

Which brings me to the third peace the world brings. Peace through the security of having money and having things. But, like mood-altering substances and behaviors, having stuff can be very deceiving. It may give peace for a while but then the good feeling goes and you need more. It may feel good to have more things or more money in the bank, but what is enough? When do you have enough to be at peace? And how much time and anxiety does it use to keep looking after all your stuff and making sure your money is growing as it should be?

The peace that Jesus brings is not dependent on any of these things. It is grounded in God's limitless love for us. This love enables us to be bold and to take risks, knowing that we are never alone, even if we don't have the things that the world says bring peace. God's peace comes both as a gift but also as a result of spiritual practice. We do experience moments of spontaneous healing when a sudden insight or a moment of grace changes something dramatically. But most of us come to the peace of God through continued practice and prayer. Because most of us have a great deal of baggage to clear out of the way.

I suffered greatly with depression until I was in my later thirties. Then, and even after, it was almost impossible to pray or meditate alone because the whirls of darkness and pain threatened to engulf me whenever I sat in silence. It is still easier for me to pray with others than alone. But now the silence is a gift, not something to be feared and avoided. Every day I pray that God will graciously and gracefully move out of the way any blocks that prevent me being at peace. When I notice that I am angry or hurting, I am now usually able to take even a baby step back and let my reactions diminish.

Because the peace of God increases as we realize at a visceral level that we are deeply loved just exactly as we are. Our human relationships may be a mess, there may be many things that we need to change before we are living a fully Christ-like life, but we are loved here and now, today. The peace of God increases as we realize that it's not all about us, that other people have motivations and intentions that are about their lives not ours and that we will not help by attacking them, even if only in our minds. Attack thoughts keep us involved in scapegoating. Consciously letting them go sets us free.

This is the path of non-attachment that is so important in Buddhism. It doesn't mean not having human attachments and loving those around us or grieving when they go. It does mean being so centered in ourselves and in the Interbeing that is God that we do not have to react to every situation as if it were a threat. Because in Christ there is no threat.

And perhaps this is a good place to go to the mystical magical new city of Jerusalem. There is no temple in this city because the temple was the center of the sacrificial system – the system that said that killing something was pleasing to God. Jesus' death was the final sacrifice. Instead of us continuing to try to appease an angry God with meals of meat, poultry or grain, God provided the lamb without blemish for the feast of reconciliation. Instead of us having to scapegoat someone, in the new and coming creation we will be at peace in Christ. So the temple of the new city is not a building of sacrifice but the very person of the Creator God and the Lamb.

And this city is deeply connected with the wider creation. In the vision, “The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

This is what Jesus did between the time of his temptation when he was tempted to take a short cut and gain power without making the sacrifice of his life, and the time of his ascension when his full nature as Christus Rex, Lord of the universe, Cosmic Christ, was revealed. He continued the work of creation and through his life, death and ministry opened up a whole new world of possibility for us so that we may be conscious co-creators with God in creating this ever-expanding universe which is itself the body and life of God. We humans are not the center of the universe but we are an integral and important part of it.

Global warming shows us what a difference we can make unintentionally. Just imagine what a difference we can make intentionally. Together with God we can build the new Jerusalem where all the nations are at peace, where the scapegoating system is no more, where creation is in harmony. But only when we clean up our act – as John says, “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood.”

Let us therefore practice peace – peace with one another, peace with creation, peace with God and together we can build the peaceful city.

Please join with me to stand and sing Hymn 597.