

“I Give You My Peace”

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C – John 14:23-29

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, May 5, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

Our Gospel lesson this morning continues the conversation that has been the focus of our reading for the last several weeks, Jesus' conversation with his disciples at their last meal before his arrest, trial and execution. He was summing up his ministry. He was clarifying his purpose. He was wrapping things up. He was preparing these whom he loved for the next step in their discipleship. This is Jesus' *last* chance to get his point across before he turned to the cross. He washed their feet to show them the true meaning of discipleship. He gave them a new command, that they should love one another. And here in this morning's portion of this last blessing, Jesus offers them his peace.

Having spent years in the profession of arms, I suppose I have all sorts of illustrations to talk about peace. But what kept coming back to me this week, was that I really, really learned about peace on the night of January 21st, 1991.

For me, the actual fighting of the First Persian Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm, started with the explosive collision of an American Patriot missile and an Iraqi Scud, almost directly over my head on the night of the *17th*. For months of preparation, the headquarters of the 18th Airborne Corps had been located about five miles northwest of Dhahran Airport, on the Saudi Arabian coast. As the Corps' medical planning officer, I was in on all the plans. So on the night of the *17th*, when Dhahran airport became the busiest point of departure for the aircraft that were bombing Iraq, I pretty much knew that our busy little center of activity out there in the desert was about to become a *very* dangerous place.

I had stayed up later than most of the ten men in my “dorm” room, writing a note to my wife and another to my boys. When I was done, I slipped on my flip-flops and stepped out into the open courtyard, on my way to the bathroom, the truth be told. The explosion of one missile with another lit up the sky above me, and shook the buildings around me. I ran back into my room to find all my companions sitting bolt upright in their cots as I grabbed and donned my gas mask against the possibility that a madman had armed his missiles with the chemical agents we knew he possessed. Over the first few days and nights of the war, the skies over us were often *filled* with the explosion of Scud missiles as the battery of Patriot missiles thwarted their attack on the airfield.

On the night of January 19th, our protective shield missed one of the incoming projectiles, and a missile hit a warehouse in Dhahran. Some of you may remember that the Scud was never renowned for any sort of accuracy. But *that* night, *that* missile, hit *that* warehouse that had been rented to the U.S. Air Force as a staging area for newly deployed junior support personnel, and thirty-nine young men and women were killed as they lay in their sleeping bags.

So it was, that on the night of January 21st, 1991, my friend, Sergeant First Class Karle “Smitty” Smith and I were still dressed in the thick, heavy garments that were meant to protect us from the potential chemical fallout from one of those missiles, and we were once again in the masks that made breathing safe but laborious, and conversation nearly impossible. It was decidedly uncomfortable to be working in that gear, but I was more than just a little relieved to be leaving “Scud Alley” that night, heading northwest as part of an advance party to set up a new Corps headquarters.

As we busily prepared our truck and our belongings for the long trip, through the buzzy little mouthpieces and the Vaderish respirations of our gas masks, Smitty and I talked about our lives. We talked about our families. We talked about our hopes and our dreams. By this time, I had been talking for nearly a year about leaving the military to go to seminary. Yet it was *Smitty* who spoke up as we waited for the signal to move out through the dark night, and said, “Dai-Uy, can we pray?” Through those buzzy

little mouthpieces, my friend and I prayed the Lord's Prayer together. As the command came to join the convoy into the Saudi Arabian night, as warplanes rushed overhead, as diesel truck engines roared to life, with the very certain knowledge that the days ahead would hold much, much more of the same, the noise and the rush and the chaos of war lifted, for just a moment, and I knew for a fact that *whatever* happened, Christ's peace... was mine.

That is the peace that Jesus Christ offers us. Not the absence of war or conflict. Not the assurance that everything will always remain the same. Not some sort of suspension of every trouble. But in the *midst* of changes and challenges that may throw our lives into chaos and confusion, Jesus gives us his peace. In the *midst* of the anguish and torment of loss, in the *midst* of the uncertainty and unsettledness of an ever-changing world, in the *midst* of the frantic, frenetic, flurry of activity that sometimes seems to define *all* our days, Jesus gives us his peace. Even in the *midst* of the fear, in the *midst* of our doubt, in the *midst* of the overwhelming *flood* of things over which we have absolutely no control, Jesus gives us *his* peace.

When the voices of friends and even the voice of our own heart fall still, his is the peace that dives to where no human comfort can reach. Through the darkest of nights and the busiest of days, in the satisfaction of completion and in the loss of leavetaking, his is the peace that speaks absolute certainty. To the lightest of hearts and to the heaviest, *he* is with us - to comfort us, to guide us, to speak to our hearts that all *will* be well.

He gives us his peace, not as the world gives... not with conditions, and provisos, and strings attached, not just when we have dotted all our "i"s and crossed all our "t"s, not just when we are in his good favor. Not as the *world* gives, but as he *alone* can give, Jesus Christ *gives* us his peace, and *gives* us his peace, and gives us *his* peace.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," he said, "and do *not* let them be afraid."

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!]