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## Peace in the Age of Terror

### Philippians 4:4-7

A Sermon preached in Page Auditorium on December 13, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Paul must have peeked into the future through the telescope of eternity because his words from prison resonate so much with our current realities. It's as if he knew that we needed to hear these words today. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice... The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. Words from the past that speak to our present need. As I said last week, joy is the main theme of this letter and we hear it again near the end of the letter. 'Rejoice in the Lord always.' Actually, this word, 'rejoice,' can also be translated 'farewell,' and as he closes his letter he not only wants to reemphasize the importance of joy, he wants to make his farewell message one of peace. And the peace of God will guard. Joy is good but don't forget peace. Both are a part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5). It's as if Paul knew that we needed this word now in these turbulent times. It's as if Paul knew that Christians, then and now, need the peace of God.

Many days I walk down a Divinity School hallway in the Westbrook building with its wall of glass windows looking out toward Duke Chapel. For Advent this year, in that same hallway, there is a walking path made up of a large roll of white paper, taped to the floor, with the words "love joy hope peace" in red and green written on it, not once or twice but numerous times extending down the entire hallway. As you follow the trail, these words become like a recurring theme, a repeated yearning, a perpetual reminder for this season, like a broken record but one we so deeply want to keep hearing—love joy hope peace love joy hope peace love joy hope peace. This path of paper is like a makeshift labyrinth for prayer, a souvenir of the Spirit in this age of reckless spirits that aim to quench the Spirit of love, joy, and peace. This white paper walkway is an earthly call of the Spirit to walk in this Spirit, to follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the way of Christ. Every time I move down that hallway, I pray those words—love, joy, hope, peace—because we sorely need them right now.

We need a benediction of peace and that's what Paul gives as he says farewell. Isn't it that time of year anyway? *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Grant us peace. Peace, peace, peace on earth and goodwill to all/This is the time for joy/This is the time for love/Now let us all sing together of peace, peace, peace on earth. This is the time for peace.

But this time, this year, this Advent, we are faced with everything but peace. It's a fragile moment in history. It's an anxious and fearful moment. It looks like hope unborn will die again and there's nothing more tragic than a miscarriage of hope. Paul's words resonate with our day—do not worry about anything, do not be anxious about anything. Many are anxious because in reality, we are in a milieu of melancholy and misery and madness or in colloquial terms, "one hot mess," propelled by the media machine for high ratings. Politicians and presidential candidates, and presidents of Christian universities, fanning the flames of fear and division and hatred and xenophobia and Islamophobia. This is anything but a time of peace.

There is terror and that seems to be the number one word in the national lexicon post 9/11. Terror, locally and globally, perpetuated by gun violence and pure hatred of the other because of race or religion or politics or economics. It involves guns but it involves more than guns. There wouldn't have to be a task force on hate at Duke if everything was right with the world and if guns were our only problem. Remember, there is such a thing as linguistic terrorism. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me? No. Words can kill. Words can be propelled into lives and destroy people and blow up people to disintegrate any possibility of human

community, reconciliation, and unity in God. Words can be brutal and fear-filled and create anxiety even among followers of Jesus. The tongue is like a fire.

A president of a Christian university, whose motto is “training champions for Christ,” said recently in light of the San Bernardino shooting, “If more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in and kill them.” He urged students to enroll in the university’s free certification class. Something is terribly wrong, something is not in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of peace, when we know that Jesus teaches people to love, not kill, their enemies. When we know that Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” When we know that when Jesus was hanging on a cross, he didn’t, as one writer says, “ask his followers to arm themselves. Instead, he prayed: “Father, forgive them””(Jonathan Merritt). No guns just lots of grace. Even when Jesus was arrested, the apostle Peter pulls out his sword and cuts off a Roman soldier’s ear. What does Jesus do? He heals the man’s ear and tells Peter ‘Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.’ As Christians, we shouldn’t be talking about packing heat, but packing peace, for Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. He is our peace who has broken down the walls of hostility between us! This is why we talk about being a chapel without walls. This is why Paul is so relevant for us today because we are in desperate need of the peace of God.

Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, warned how when faith is lacking we become filled with fear and gloom. Our anxiety and worry reflects a lack of confidence in God’s care and in God’s peace. “Consider the lilies....”(Luke 12). What kind of Christian witness is anxiety and fear? What kind of Christian witness is hatred of any kind? The Westbrook walkway reminds me of the true Christian witness of love, joy, hope, and peace. The danger of anxiety and worry is that it can poison your life, pierce your heart, and disturb your mind, so that your life is not one of peace but poison, making you dangerous to others. My Divinity School colleague, Susan Eastman, writes wisely that “We cannot generate freedom from anxiety by our own efforts; the attempt only pushes the anxiety underground, where it festers and leads to secret despair. But Christ will meet us at the place of worry, because Christ has descended to the depths of human despair. Therefore God has become for us the God whose peace “guards” our minds and hearts.”

We need protection these days, don’t we? We need protection from terror attacks of linguistic bombs, words that feed fear and hatred and divisions, because the real battle is the war on our hearts and minds. A grandfather was talking to his grandson about his feelings. He said, “I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, angry, and violent. The other wolf is loving and compassionate.” The grandson asked him, “Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?” The grandfather answered, “The one I feed.” Do we feed fear and anxiety or do we feed our faith? There’s a battle for our souls and spirits. There’s a battle raging within us. And the only protection and salvation we have is peace, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Today, this may not sound so useful or helpful when we have such military might but peace has a good track record; actually, it has a godly track record because this isn’t just any kind of peace. It is God’s peace, ‘the peace of God.’ That means God is the source and peace is an experience of the divine life. We may rely on the state or nation for peacemaking but remember that even during the so-called *Pax Romana*, the people subjected to imperial Rome experienced something other than peace. Tacitus, a Roman senator who served in Rome’s provinces, wrote bitterly about the empire, “They make a desolation and call it peace.” We can’t rely on any nation for real peace. Peace can only come from God.

Peace is our only and true protection. “And the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Peace will guard. Peace will stand watch. Peace is a soldier on guard at the door of your hearts and minds. A sentry for your soul. It’s ironic that peace is associated with a military term, ‘guard,’ but it suggests that the way God fights is with peace and that overcoming anxiety or worry is a real battle. God’s only weapon is nonviolent and it is defensive as it guards our hearts and minds against the assaults of fear. The importance of peace

shouldn't be surprising as elsewhere we are told to proclaim the gospel of peace with "a sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephes 6). As peace surrounds us, God battles with the word of God. Our bodies may not be guarded but our hearts and minds will be. This may not save us from being victims of drive by shootings on U.S. streets or in movie theaters, but the peace of God will save our souls. It will guard.

What is at stake today, particularly in light of our current realities, is the condition of our hearts and minds. We need peace to guard our hearts from being infiltrated by ministers and agents of hate. We need to be packing peace because if our hearts are not guarded, they will become bitter, rot with rage, and harden with hate. They will lose the softness and warmth of the compassion and love of Christ. If peace does not protect our hearts we will become dangerous to others and ourselves.

We need peace to guard our minds because it looks like we've lost our minds and the world has gone mad. One poet captures the madness of the world:

*Woke up this morning to the barking of the cows  
The scarlet moon rising from the south in the morn  
The grass a glorious blue against a green sky...  
The world's gone mad... (Alex Kadzitu)*

Human minds will not only become numb due to overexposure to violence but also dumb when our minds are given over to fright and our worst fears. We might as well say like Emily Dickinson at that point, "I felt a funeral in my brain." When our mind is attacked by fear, our mind can die or at least shut off from critical thinking and experience the worst case of "the shallows" where our minds can no longer reflect deeply. And if our mind dies, or if we stop thinking, we are no better than zombies. This is why peace needs to stand guard over our minds.

This is why Paul says right after this to think about these things—"whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace will be with you." Thinking on these things is a pathway to peace, which is why we're fighting for our sanity in an insane world. If we worry about everything and don't let our requests be known to God, the Lord may be near, but fear will consume us and we will be left without the peace of God that guards our hearts and minds. We will then be vacant of peace, absent of the presence and way of Christ, who is the Prince of peace. The peace of God possesses the power of preservation. This is why John Wesley says that without peace guarding our hearts and minds like "a garrison does a city," "the purity and vigour of our affections cannot long be preserved."

Without peace, the guardian of our hearts, standing watch in Christ Jesus, we will become our worst enemy. We will become everything we abhor and shrink from, as we give ourselves over to our closeted demons. When the peace of God guards our hearts and minds, it does so in Christ Jesus for the way of Christ is the way of peace. Peace is his life for he is our peace. Violence is not in Christ Jesus. Hate is not in Christ Jesus. Fear is not in Christ Jesus. Worry is not in Christ Jesus. Joy is in Christ Jesus. Love is in Christ Jesus. Hope is in Christ Jesus. Peace is in Christ Jesus.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, *will* guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Will guard. It's the promise of peace that gives me hope. When fear surrounds me and 'terror, terror' is the choral refrain of a frightened people, the promise of peace's protection gives me hope even though I may not fully experience it now. I know that it will guard my heart and mind and one day I will be able to testify,

*You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,*

***You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.***

***Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise (Maya Angelou)***

**You and I will be able to rise above all of the hate and fear and terror because the Lord is near with his peace that surpasses all understanding. You won't be able to explain it really when everyone else wants you to feed your phobias because how can you explain a peaceable kingdom in which a "wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11)?**

**Peace is really unexplainable. It surpasses human understanding because it isn't our peace to give; it is God's but it is ours to gain. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," Jesus says, "I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14). Do not worry about anything and the peace of God will guard.**

***I rest beneath the Almighty's shade,  
My griefs expire, my troubles cease;  
Thou, Lord, on whom my soul is stayed,  
Wilt keep me still in perfect peace. (Charles Wesley)***

**The peace of God is standing guard and peace is not just an Advent or Christmas phenomenon. We'll need it after Christmas and every day in the New Year. The fear mongering and hateful rhetoric and cycle of terror will not stop but the peace of God won't stop either. It will still guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In this coming election year of 2016, I cast my vote for peace. It's really the only way we'll truly win.**