

"THE PEACE OF GOD"

November 12, 1989

TEXT: Isaiah 26:3 "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee because he trusts in thee."

On Wednesday afternoon, when I began to write this sermon, probably nothing was farther from my mind than the Berlin Wall. But, less than twenty-four hours later, what happened there dominated the thoughts of the whole world. I am sure we all rejoice at what seems to be the most significant thawing yet in East-West relations.

Surely, the mind-boggling events of these last several days are a very hopeful sign, and I am sure all would agree that we must, in President Bush's words, "seize every opportunity to contribute to the advancement of peace and democracy." I know that your prayers, like my own, are for a just and lasting peace, not only in Europe, but throughout the world. To that end we devote our hopes, our prayers, and our untiring efforts. We must not only be optimistic. We must be willing to reach out. We must be prepared to take some risks.

But that does not mean that we have to be gullible. Seventy-one years ago yesterday, at five o'clock in the morning, what has since come to be known as The Armistice was signed in a railroad car at Compiegne, in northern France. Six hours later, the fighting abruptly stopped, and the war to end all war was over. Then, too, there was dancing in the streets. Then, too, there were grateful prayers and high hopes.

But since that time there have been many disappointments. In October of 1938, Neville Chamberlain returned home from Munich to announce, "I believe it is peace in our time . . . Peace with honor." As it turned out, of course, it was neither peace nor honor. And a whole new generation had to go to war to safeguard the freedoms you and I too often take for granted. Then came Korea, a war --excuse me, a police action-- that never officially came to an end. More recently still, there was Vietnam. Perhaps some of you remember the day in 1973 when President Nixon proudly announced the signing of the Vietnam Peace Agreement, calling it "the beginning of a generation of peace." I suspect that the Cambodians, and a great many Vietnamese, would disagree with him.

It is almost enough to make us accept Ambrose Bierce's cynical definition of peace as "a period of cheating between two periods of fighting"? It certainly calls to mind Jeremiah's lament so many centuries ago; "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying: 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace.'"

At any rate, Armistice Day long ago lost its original meaning, and we have changed its name to Veterans' Day. If it is too early to commemorate a lasting peace, at least we can honor those who risked so much in the quest for it. And well we should. We owe them more than we can ever know, much less repay. But there is still a part of me which wants to celebrate Armistice Day, to remember that document not because of what it did but because of what it failed to do. We need to be reminded, as Herbert Hoover once said, that "Peace is not made at the council table, but in the hearts of men." If there is no peace there, how can there be peace in the world.

And, while we are at it, we might also remember some of the other places where peace has been sought, but not found. We might remember, for instance, those who try to find their peace in needles, or pills, or bottles, only to find themselves enslaved in tragedy. Or those who seek peace in the accumulation of things: cars and houses, stocks and bank accounts. They think they are creating security when, in fact, they may just be finding more to worry about. Or those who hide behind a whirlwind of business, social, or recreational activities. In the end they wind up more harried than ever and losing the very things that make for peace. They, too, have "healed the wound of my people lightly, saying: 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace.'"

A long time ago the Duc de Rochefoucauld said, "If we have not peace within ourselves, it is in vain to seek it from outward sources. And it is precisely that inward peace which God offers us so freely through His Son, Jesus Christ. Who of us can read the events of Jesus' life, and especially of those last few days, without marvelling at his incredible peace of mind and spirit even though it is hard to imagine any kind of suffering which he did not have to face. He owned no property, achieved no earthly authority, and was despised rather than loved. He saw his teachings ignored, his ministry misunderstood, his love rejected. And, in the end, he was tortured and executed by the very people he sought to save.

As John's Gospel so eloquently puts it, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." [John 1:10-11] Yet he was calm before Pilate, silent before the taunts and tortures of the Roman garrison, and forgiving from the very cross on which he breathed his last. Even his apparent cry of frustration, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me" was but a reference to the twenty-second psalm, which is a song of triumph in adversity and not frustration.

And, as he was about to be crucified, he said to those who follow him, "The peace I have I give unto you." [John 14:27] As his disciples, you and I have been promised the very peace we so desperately desire and which we so much admire in him. It is his gift to us, if we are willing to seek it where he found it, in

intimate fellowship with God. "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee"

Long ago Petrarch wrote, "Five great enemies of peace inhabit with us --avarice, ambition, envy, anger, and pride. If these were to be banished, we should infallibly enjoy perpetual peace." And, if they could be banished from the world, it, too, would finally have the peace for which we so desperately long and pray. If we allow the Spirit of Christ to dwell at the center of our lives, there would be no room for these evils.

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me." We have all heard that time and time again. But do we understand it? Do we even want to? This is has been called the "Me-First Generation", the Narcissistic Age. We pride ourselves in our freedom, especially we Congregationalists. We want what we want, when we want, with no interference from any one or any thing.

A yoke, however, is a device which restricts freedom. in two important ways. First, it links us to a burden that needs to be born. The simile used by Jesus does not portray an animal at rest -- eating, or sleeping, or enjoying itself. It presents instead the picture of an animal at work. And it is to that work that Jesus calls us. If we forget ourselves --our wants, our convenience-- and turn instead to the duties which call us, the needs we can serve, then --and only then-- we shall find rest unto our souls.

And, secondly, a yoke links us to One who labors with us and helps us to bear the load. We are never in the traces alone. We are yoked to Him who is stronger, wiser, and more patient than we. It is only when we try to pull the load by ourselves that we find it too much for us. An English psychiatrist once wrote, "With peace in his soul, a man can face the most terrifying experiences. But without peace in his soul he cannot manage even as simple a task as writing a letter." Jesus offers to join with us so that he can share our burdens and we can share his peace.

Of course, that does not mean that everything in life will go the way we want it to. On the contrary, Jesus openly warned, "In the world you will have tribulation." However, he added, "But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." If we accept the yoke he offers, if we keep our minds stayed on God as Jesus did, we shall know his kind of peace, the peace which passes all understanding. And, if enough of us can find that peace --and share it with others-- then the world will have peace indeed. To that end let us now pray, in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier:

"Drop thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease.
Take from our souls the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.

"Breathe through the pulses of desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire
O still, small voice of calm."

AMEN.