

Sermon: Neither Sun nor Moon but Peace

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29**

Last week, Jesus gave us a new commandment to love one another. And it was a commandment, which makes it law. Now, we all know how difficult it is to truly love others. Maybe the real question should be, have we relied on ourselves too much when instead we should have accepted as a gift the love God showed the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Today, Jesus leaves us not with another commandment but with another gift: peace.

There was among the disciples a great concern that after Jesus was betrayed, tried, convicted, and crucified to death that the movement would die with him.

The Resurrection was a great surprise in many ways, but the problem of keeping the movement going without its leader remained. No one had really thought about planning ahead. A lot of what John wrote in his Gospel was slanted toward Jesus going away but then coming back.

We are left to keep his word, to follow him, to look forward and rejoice, to trust and rely on God and on Jesus, even when it seems as if we will never see him again.

In an extended discourse during dinner – it covers four chapters – Jesus tried to prepare the disciples (and us) for the time ahead, for both his immediate absence from the world and also for his ‘imminent’ return. While we wait, the Word rests with us and within us.

Now, are we expecting to actually *see* Jesus? According to verse 26 – according to Jesus – no, but we should very much expect a visit from the Holy Spirit.

In this Easter season, we’ve been reading from John’s Gospel every week, and a strong love theme keeps popping up, by design. The point is, Jesus wants the disciples to keep their faith lives together and that means loving one another and loving God.

In verse 25, Jesus reminds the disciples that he has told them what they needed to know. All who love him will keep his word and thus God will live within them. But if they loved him as they should – “If you *really* loved me,” he said – they would rejoice that he was going to the Father. And they don’t. Instead, they worried. So, there’s a contrast in expectations here – a limited love might not be enough for us to keep Jesus’ words, especially as they come from God. It’s kind of an all-or-nothing proposition.

Now, as the Gospel readings have included a love theme lately, so today’s reading from Revelation includes a strong theme of light and dark.

If you had the opportunity to view the recent lunar eclipse, you know how spooky celestial light can be. Officially called the Super Flower Blood Moon Zappa Eclipse, it started out slowly. For us, there was a lot of cloud cover moving past but you could still see the Earth’s shadow beginning to get in the way. That alone made it worth watching. The Moon slowly disappearing in a deep red haze was a good reminder that our little planet moves through the heavens, and we are hardly ever aware of it.

In Revelation, we heard, ‘the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it’ (21:23); ‘the nations will walk by the glory of God’ (21:24), with *glory* meaning radiance; ‘there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun’ (22:5), for the Lord God will be their light.

In the new city, there will be no ambiguity of light – in a normal day, the alternating light from the sun and the moon creates shadows; the world is not lit all the way; in a sense, it’s shrouded. We do not have complete vision. But in the new holy city, we will have perfect light, as it will be fully lit by God’s own radiance.

As it should be with our love for Jesus, all ambiguities will be swept away.

In the Gospel reading, verse 27 is maybe the most meaningful verse in the whole passage, and it is key to understanding Jesus.

Knowing what is coming next, he said,

“Peace I *leave* with you; my peace I *give* to you.

I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (14:27).

At the end of the Gospel, the first post-Resurrection words Jesus says to the disciples, who are hiding behind locked doors, are, “Peace be with you.”

The only other time the word appears in this Gospel is also in the context of the Last Supper, just a little further on in chapter 16, and so the word deserves a closer look.

There's an old, old saying that 'the Romans built a desert and called it Peace.'

For us, *peace* means primarily the absence of war. In that sense, we have only a sporadic peace, and the world has rarely ever had complete peace in all of recorded history, but it's still something for which we hope and pray.

For Jesus and his disciples, *peace* would be *shalom*, which is something else entirely. *Shalom* implies wholeness, well-being, a good life. *Shalom* is a gift from God. Jerusalem itself is literally the City of Peace.

So, the peace which Jesus gives is serenity, tranquility, confidence, and courage in the midst of trouble and an unsettled world. The world does not know such peace and therefore cannot give it.¹ The world can often only give despair, inequity, war, and death.

So, we might well ask, why in the world is the world hostile to Jesus?

In John's Gospel, the world is very religious and therefore does not see a need for Jesus. Yes, the religious nation is looking for a Messiah but not one from Galilee. The Jesus they see is not the Jesus they need.² It may be that way for some of us too.

We might also ask, what does the world want, if not peace?

In our time, the world wants to be secure – but on its own terms. Just look at the mess the world is in to see how well that's going.

Now let's imagine that we live in Ukraine, but not in an active war zone; imagine we're some place where we feel safe. But, knowing what is going on elsewhere in the country, and not so far away, do we feel serene, tranquil, or confident?

Or do we feel anxious, knowing that our country is under siege and that bombs may start dropping on our heads at any moment? Imagine losing Hingham Square to rocket fire tonight and having to clear the rubble as we search for family and friends.

Now think of the suffering that Jesus will face over the next night and day.

His impending death further highlights his promise that his peace differs from the world's peace.

It's not a coincidence that the first and last word spoken in every worship service here is *peace*. We do this to underscore his words and to offer again God's gift.

So, if we put these two things together, Jesus's promise of peace and God's radiant light to come, what do we have?

First, the promise of peace is *Christ's* peace, *his* shalom. It's a gift, not a word of welcome or good-bye. He's affirming what life is like when we stand in God's love. His peace says that things will turn out okay because God is God. God is at work in ways that we are not aware of, in the same way the Earth moves through the heavens while we stand here talking.

Secondly, we know all about the turmoil in the world, but we also know Jesus. He said, "*my* peace I give to you." He promised us *his* peace, and we can rely on that. Doing so enables us to give up some anxiety and tension and take a small step toward not letting our hearts be troubled or afraid.

Amen.

¹ Hesselink, I John. "John 14:23-29." *Interpretation* 43, no. 2 (April 1989): 177.

² Jeske, Richard L. "John 14:27 and 16:33." *Interpretation* 38, no. 4 (October 1984): 407.