



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Lenten Midweek Prayer: March 13, 2019

Sermon Title: "Peace and Praise"

Psalm 34:1-3, 14; Luke 2:25-32

Our theme for these Wednesdays in Lent comes from Psalm 34:14, "seek peace, and pursue it." The idea came to us from the Lutheran World Federation, which has adopted this verse as their "theme" or "watchword" for all of 2019. And so it's our goal that *our* engagement with this same theme throughout Lent will put us in unity with a global communion of 148 churches in the Lutheran tradition, representing over 75.5 million Christians in 99 countries.

To accomplish this, each of our Wednesday services will include four verses from Psalm 34. Three of those verses will vary each week, but the closing verse will always be verse 14, which states in part: "Seek peace, and pursue it." We will pair those verses from Psalm 34 with a complementary reading from one of the four Gospels. In the end, I hope this little exercise will lead us to a better understanding of Psalm 34, a deeper understanding of God's peace, and a greater closeness to Jesus and to our siblings in Christ, be they around the block or around the world.

We begin our exploration of Psalm 34 with verses that call us to praise the Lord and to sing his name. That doesn't sound very *peaceful*, does it? Well, that's Psalm 34's first gift to us, a reminder that peace is not a matter of the *ears* but a matter of the *heart*. Certainly we *can* experience restful peace in deep silence. It's one of the reasons I regularly visit a monastery. Silence is also central to the new Centering Prayer group that we've started here at Grace.

But peace can be noisy too. I feel deep peace in my heart when I experience scores of preschoolers laughing and chattering in our hallways. I feel peace in the joyful chaos of Super Wednesday or Sunday morning worship. And few things move me more than the kind of beautiful, sacred music we have the privilege to hear at Grace all the time. The peace I feel in my heart – the peace of contentment and security – is what Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians as "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." (Phil. 4:7) God's peace is unlike any other peace. After all, some kinds of peace can be purchased rather cheaply. Buy ice cream cones for cranky children, and you'll have peace, but only for a little while. Buy yourself something special, and you may experience a feeling of peaceful contentment – but not for long. Deep down, what we *really* seek is a peace that's *durable* and *transformational*. *That* kind of peace is centered on *Jesus*. And *that* kind of peace is connected to *praise*.

Our Gospel illustrates this through a man named Simeon. I think we can surmise from this reading that he was an older man, perhaps in his final years, and Luke states explicitly that he was righteous and devout. Simeon was steeped in God's promises in Holy Scripture, and I think those promises sustained Simeon in what otherwise was probably a very hard life. Just

think about it: Simeon, this devout, elderly Jew, was living in a day and age when his people had become a laughing stock. The once proud days of kingdoms headed by legendary kings like David and Solomon were long gone. Wars, corruption, a devastating exile, and now occupation by the Roman Empire and the most powerful army in the world had brought Israel to its knees. It would have caused most people to give up hope and to question their faith in a God whose people could so easily be conquered and oppressed. But not Simeon.

How often do you think he wandered over to the temple in Jerusalem, seeking that long-promised spark of hope from God? Surely this wasn't the first time. I suspect he showed up every day, waiting, praying, and wondering. How did Simeon anticipate God would fulfill those grand promises of deliverance and salvation? Would it be through a mighty army? A charismatic leader? Rolling thunder and bolts of lightning? Simeon had no way of knowing. And yet he trusted that *when* it came, *however* it came, he would know.

Chances are that not another soul paid much notice that day as Joseph and Mary brought their child Jesus to the temple. And why *would* anyone notice? To the *outward eye*, there was absolutely nothing remarkable about them. But to the *eyes of the heart*, what Mary and Joseph held in their arms was salvation itself. The Spirit drove Simeon straight to them, and he at long last was able to behold *and* hold salvation in *his* arms. It was the culmination of all his hopes and dreams, and the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Simeon was so moved that he essentially said, "God, this is all I've ever wanted. If I die right now, I die a happy man." How could Simeon make such a claim? Because Simeon had encountered Jesus, and the peace that flowed through him was like heaven on earth. Simeon's response was pure praise.

When our hearts are centered on Jesus we experience the same peace Simeon experienced. And our response should likewise be praise. Note carefully the order of things though. We don't want to turn praise into a mere work. Simeon didn't go to the temple and put on a show, like some wild-eyed evangelist, so he could impress God with his piety and earn a look at Jesus. No, God fulfilled God's promise in Jesus as a loving *gift* to Simeon and to us. The *Spirit* led Simeon to Jesus. The *Spirit* connected Simeon's heart to Jesus. The *Spirit* filled Simeon with peace. And Simeon was moved to *respond* with praise.

It's so easy to turn Lent into a giant work, a season filled with do's and don'ts that we think will unlock heaven's gates for us. But as Simeon reminds us, about all we're really capable of doing is *just showing up*. But you know what? That's enough. *Just show up*. You are loved! The *Spirit* will lead us to Jesus. The *Spirit* will connect our hearts to Jesus. The *Spirit* will fill us with peace. And in response to all of that, we will be moved to praise.

Some of that praise will take the shape of noisy songs and loud words. And some of it will unfold in sheer silence. But *all* of it will delight our Lord.

Our watchword for Lent: "Seek peace and pursue it." How will we do that? Like Simeon, we will show up, trusting that the Holy Spirit has something life-changing in store for us. And in response? We will *praise*. Amen.