

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Luke 10:1-20; Isaiah 66:10-14
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 4, 2010

“The Country of Peace”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

It is good to be back in the pulpit once again. As many of you know I took some vacation time during the last month, but what better time could there be to return than on this special day (weekend) in the life of our country. The 4th of July is of course not a religious but a national observance. But there is much to learn and to apply to this day from the words of the Scripture lessons which are the readings for this Sunday of the church year, the 6th Sunday after Pentecost.

There are also several things from my vacation trip which are applicable to this day as well. The first is that I spent part of my vacation in British Columbia, Canada. That is, in another country, another of the nations of the world. And of course, a country that as part of the British Commonwealth, is a monarchy whose head of state is Queen Elizabeth II, a fact very obvious in the money which they use, in the symbolism in the parliament building in Victoria, B.C., in the fact that I received cash from the ATM machine of the Royal Bank of Canada and listened to a carillon concert outside of the Royal British Columbia Museum. So it is somewhat fitting that the Patriotic Hymn we sang in place of the Hymn of Praise this day is actually an English hymn—a hymn loved by Princess Diana, and sung at both her wedding and funeral. The words to the first verse might have struck some of you as a little extreme in fact, but it is the second verse which has application to today especially, and we will return to it at the conclusion of this message.

The second point is that it is very instructive to fly across this nation of ours as I did from Seattle home to Milwaukee a little over a week ago. You see a lot from 39,000 feet: From the waters of Puget sound to the waters of Lake Michigan, literally from sea to shining sea. The snow capped glory of the mountains of Washington state, the purple mountain majesty of Mount Rainier and Mount Adams, the volcanic crater of Mount St. Helens as a reminder of the awful power of the created fallen world, the distant view of Mount Hood in Oregon, 150 miles away. But most strikingly, though there were clouds along the way, the view of the fields and the pastures and the tilled land stretching for mile after mile was a powerful reminder of the bounty and blessedness of this land that we call home—a land that God has blessed with abundance. So I was in two countries, at peace with each other, though we are ever reminded of the fact that there are many places in the world where there is no peace and where people die in the violence of war, and that there are those who will sacrifice their lives for the sake of peace, who will offer “entire and whole and perfect, the service of [their] love.”

I. The Peace of the Lessons

And it is peace which is the central theme of this message. Indeed the theme printed, "The Country of Peace" makes that clear. All three of the Scripture lessons for this day speak of peace. For the Lord would remind us what true peace is and what is really the country of peace.

The theme of peace pervades all three of the lessons. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah proclaims the words of the Lord concerning Jerusalem the city of God, "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream." The Apostle Paul continues in that same vein, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ... Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God." Here the emphasis is put right where it belongs. The peace we have is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ. He in fact, is our peace who has broken down the wall of separation between God and man. As the prophet Isaiah said, "The chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed." And Jesus himself told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, not the peace that the world gives, give I unto you."

So it is not surprising that in the Gospel lesson, Jesus tells those whom he sends out to greet every household with the words, "Peace be to this house. If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you." The blessing of peace upon those who receive the messengers of the Lord is a great and marvelous gift. For God's peace truly comes in knowing of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior.

You will notice in the bulletin this day several references to the passing of the peace—a short explanation at the point at which we asked you to do it and a longer explanation on the back cover. We are hoping to give the greeting time that we have taken for many years in our services more of its historic meaning as we share the peace of the Lord as a reminder of the reconciliation which is ours in Christ Jesus and the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

II. The Country of Peace

What then is the country of peace that we refer to in our theme. It is not our nation. Though it is very appropriate to be reminded that we are blessed in so many ways in our land and that the greeting of the disciples in the homes where they were sent is just as valid for a whole nation: "Peace be to this house." It is also worthwhile to remember that the blessings upon our land are not permanent or eternal. In the history of the world, this nation is one of many. This nation has been blessed in many ways, but we must never forget the source of those blessings. It is never a wise thing to stand before the Lord with pride and boasting for so many of the empires of the world lie in dust and ashes—rather blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. The people of God need to continue to place this nation before the mercy seat of the Lord for it truly needs our prayer. The times are troubled and faith in many hearts grows cold.

What then is the country of peace? The answer is most clearly given by the Lord Jesus in the closing words of the Gospel lesson for today: "Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." There is the country of peace. For we have here no continuing city, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, rather, our citizenship is in heaven. Commentators have suggested that the Old Testament lesson is not merely speaking of the earthly Jerusalem, but of the heavenly city— for it is only there that peace will flow like a river and the glory of the nations will be like an overflowing stream. There is our eternal home. The country of peace is the kingdom of the prince of peace. His cross is our peace. In that cross alone we can boast.

And we have returned as promised to the second verse of that English patriotic hymn we sang earlier. Maybe the words will mean more to you now:

And there's another country, I heard of long ago.
Most dear to them that love her,
Most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies,
We may not see her King,
Her fortress is a faithful heart,
Her pride is suffering,
And soul by soul and silently,
her shining bounds increase
And her ways are ways of gentleness
and all her paths are peace.

That indeed is the country of peace. May God bless your journey to that land in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.