

BOUNDLESS PEACE

Philippians 4:4-7

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/boundless-peace/

I.

I've taken shortcuts in life. Some are funny, like stapling my unraveled pant hem for nearly two years rather than mending it, and some are harmful, like avoiding a complicated but necessary conversation with a friend. We all take shortcuts, thinking they will bring peace, but more often, they leave us with loose ends.

We can't staple the hem of life and relationships when they unravel. We try, though. We sweep problems under the rug and mistake the illusion of calm for genuine peace. This time of year, we sing about silent nights where all is calm, but we live in noisy days where we're two seconds from a complete breakdown in aisle nine of the store. Our pants aren't the only things unraveling some days. After the winter break, when some of us have our houses tidy again and our new 2025 planners ready to go, we'll be fooled into thinking we've attained peace, but then everything will churn up again in the New Year, and we'll realize we achieved calm but not the peace that surpasses understanding. The world offers temporary fixes, but true peace is far more profound.

Rewatching one of my favorite TV shows, *Madam Secretary*, I was struck by a line from Elizabeth McCord, the U.S. Secretary of State. After a long day of trying to negotiate peace, she tells her husband, "Peace is a beautiful thing. Making peace ... not so much."

II.

This tension between the illusion of peace and true peace isn't new. History offers us powerful examples. During the holiday season, enslaved people in the US often received extra food, alcohol, or rest—not out of generosity but as a means of control. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass explained, these comforts masked profound injustices and were used to maintain dominance and prevent rebellion. Some owners gave as gifts the things they withheld throughout the year, like shoes, clothing, and money. This served as a reminder to enslaved workers of their dependence on their owners. Even during Christmas, enslaved people were still bought and sold, with some families torn apart forever on New Year's Day, known as "Heartbreak Day."ⁱ

Yet, many enslaved people saw through this deception. They recognized that true peace couldn't come through small comforts that masked their oppression. Instead, they used these moments of "peace" to plan for freedom. Many enslaved people used the holiday season when their owners were distracted and drunk to rebel or escape to freedom.

The Christmas narrative offered hope for genuine peace. Jesus, born into poverty and under the shadow of empire, represented God's solidarity with the marginalized and the promise of

freedom from oppression. True peace isn't about avoiding conflict or masking injustice. It's about facing hard truths and working toward wholeness, even when difficult. As Jesus demonstrates throughout his ministry: "Peace is a beautiful thing. Making peace ... not so much."

When life and relationships unravel, we can't just staple the hem. We can't control our way to peace. We can't throw some gifts and rest at injustice and call it good. Genuine peace isn't about avoiding conflict or maintaining surface-level calm. True peace is trusting God's presence in and through all things. From the strength and confidence of God's presence with us, we join God in restoring what is broken, even when it's hard.

III.

Paul writes about peace in Philippians 4:4-7. He writes from prison yet speaks of joy and peace: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. 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."

Paul's words from prison speak to a deeper understanding of peace. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means wholeness and flourishing. *Shalom* is more than inner or spiritual peace; it means wholeness and the welfare of all creation. The Greek word for peace, *eirene* (I-ray-nay), speaks of unity and bringing together what was broken. For example, two friends who reconcile after a fight experience *eirene* or peace. They come back together, and their relationship becomes whole.

This is the peace Paul describes—not an absence of conflict, but God's presence amid our struggles and working with us to restore what is broken.

I've always longed for peace — the kind you breathe in when you look in on children sleeping, clutching books and stuffed animals. They sleep in peace knowing you are near - watching over them, protecting and tending to them, and you will be there when they wake.

Perhaps peace for you and me is found in the truth of who we are: children of God, floundering and struggling to make sense of life, family, and work, but loved just as we are. Maybe peace begins when we embrace and trust God's presence, even in our prisons of fear and uncertainty or when life unravels. Maybe peace comes when we remember that God is near, watching over us, protecting and tending to us, and will be there when we wake.

IV.

Much of what Paul writes in our passage today guides us in receiving the gift of God's peace and being people of peace. Paul offers us three practical tools to find peace in our lives.

1. **Rejoice and worship:** This isn't about forcing happiness when life is hard. It's about intentionally shifting our focus to God's presence and goodness, even in difficult times.

When the kids are fighting, the bills are due, and work is overwhelming, we can still choose to recognize God's presence. Advent is this beautiful reminder that God shows up. God comes near. God moves into the neighborhood and our lives because God loves us. At my monthly pastors' coffee meeting this week, Father Matthew bid us goodbye with this Advent reminder, "Jesus is coming for us!" That might sound ominous if we didn't know Jesus's motive was love. God's boundless presence and love is reason enough for our joy and worship.

2. **Surrender worries in prayer with thanksgiving.** Notice that Paul doesn't say, "Don't have worries." He says to take them to God. Are you anxious about a medical test, your child's future, paying rent, or the state of the world? Bring these to God—not as a magic fix, but as a way of sharing the burden. I pray because my fears, longings, gratitude, and complaints need expression. I lift them to God in quiet moments, on walks, or whispered into my pillow. I believe God holds them all, never letting a single concern fall unnoticed. Not because I am good or deserve answers, but because God is ever-present—already in the future I fear, already loving me through grief, and always ready to comfort and sustain. God abides even in collapse, boredom, selfishness, or when life unravels. I know this is true, even when I don't feel it. When we give our worries to God, God gifts us with peace that defies understanding but remains undeniably real.
3. **Focus on what is true, honorable, and praiseworthy:** This isn't toxic positivity. It's about intentionally guarding our minds and hearts by dwelling on God rather than our fears. Paul says from his prison cell, you won't understand it, but trust me Worship God, Thank God, Trust God, and in return, the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. Sounds like a great gift exchange to me. Guarding our mind means being mindful of what we focus on and think about, what we set our minds and hearts on, and who we focus on. When we choose to live thanking God and trusting God, we focus on God's presence, and God gifts us with peace.

However, following Jesus is not simply a matter of enjoying peace in our hearts or our relationship with God. Jesus calls us to join his revolutionary movement to bring shalom to a broken world—to be peacemakers, not just peacekeepers. "Peace is a beautiful thing. Making peace ... not so much."

This peace isn't passive; it's active. It's the kind of peace that Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Mother Teresa demonstrated. It's the peace we see in protests, vigils, and when we gather on Sunday mornings against all odds. It's when we cry out for justice, name the places where peace is missing, and stand in the gap.

V.

For the second year, we're hosting in our gym a cold-weather shelter for the homeless—a vital ministry that provides warmth, safety, and care during the harshest months. Our guests daily express gratitude for meals and a safe place to sleep. Yet, as a church committed to genuine peace, we know this isn't enough.

God calls us to seek true peace—shalom—by addressing the deeper causes of homelessness and housing insecurity. What would it look like to pursue wholeness for our neighbors? To advocate for affordable housing, partner with mental health and addiction services, and fight for just policies that protect vulnerable individuals and families? As a church, we are digging deeper into these questions.

Offering temporary relief is essential, but we must reweave what has unraveled. We can't throw extra food and three months of rest at housing injustice and call it good. True peace demands more than a quick fix—it's about creating a world where everyone knows the dignity of a home and the security of belonging. This work is hard, but it's the work of a church living out Christ's call to love, restore, and transform.

VI.

This Advent, you might long for peace and quiet—a still moment with your coffee or an evening free from obligations. These are beautiful gifts, and I hope you receive them. But the more extraordinary gift is God's peace even when your coffee is cold and your evening is chaotic. It is peace that whispers, "You are not alone. You are loved. I am making all things whole again."

This peace isn't reserved for Sunday mornings or quiet moments. It's for Monday morning traffic, tense family gatherings, financial stress, and challenging conversations. It's not about escaping struggle but trusting God's presence within it.

This Advent, may we refuse to settle for fleeting calm or stapled hems that distract us from deeper needs. Instead, let's embrace God's peace, which sustains us in our unraveling and calls us to help mend what's broken. Whether it's mending a relationship, volunteering, or laying your burdens before God, know that the Prince of Peace walks with you, inviting you to receive his boundless peace and share it with a world desperate for wholeness and healing. Rejoice in God, surrender your worries in prayer, and dwell on what is true and good for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/christmas-slavery-american-south>