

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Leslie G. Reimer
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA
on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
January 28, 2024**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I invite you to listen to these words of prayer. May it be your will, Holy One, our God, our Ancestors' God, that you erase war and bloodshed from the world and in its place draw down a great and glorious peace, so that nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Rather, may all the inhabitants of the earth recognize and deeply know this great truth, that we have not come into this world for strife and division, nor for hatred and rage, nor provocation and bloodshed. We have come here only to encounter you, eternally blessed one. And so we ask your compassion upon us, raise up by us what is written, "I shall place peace upon the earth, and you shall lie down safe and undisturbed. And I shall banish evil beasts from the earth, and the sword shall not pass through your land. But let justice come in waves like water, and righteousness flow like a river. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Holy One, as the waters cover the sea. So may it be, and we say, "Amen."

These words of a prayer for peace are the words of the prayer which 97-year-old Rose Malinger led each Saturday morning at Tree of Life until the day she was killed. This prayer, especially seen from that poignant viewpoint, carries with it our universal longing and yearning for peace. From the time there were humans and conflict, in other words, probably pretty much from the beginning, there have most likely been prayers for peace. Prayers to a power greater than ourselves to quiet our strife. From all our human and spiritual ancestors we learn to plead for peace.

The collect we pray this morning is a prayer for peace. Words of supplication to the eternal God. It is an ancient prayer, one that has been prayed by Christians since the sixth century. It is a clear and simple prayer. It was and is still a daily prayer. We hear this petition when the Calvary Choir sings, as they sang it in Latin this morning, but more usually as they sing it as part of the service of Eden song, where the response is "Give peace in our time, O Lord, because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God." In our time, grant us your peace. We ask with all our hearts. Peace in our time resonates with our deepest fears and our deepest hopes.

Interestingly enough, people who write and comment about the history of this particular collect, from the 6th century Latin through the 16th century Book of Common Prayer translation by Thomas Cranmer to our current use, all make exactly the same observation. They say that the prayer seems to reflect its time. The 6th century marked by the fractures and upheaval following the fall of the Western Roman Empire with, of course, also a pandemic of bubonic plague thrown in. There's immersion in all of the political and religious tumult of 16th century England and the increasing sense of chaos around us now. In these times and in countless others, people have looked to God for the gift of peace. People look for God's wisdom and God's power to accomplish what is not possible for us to do on our own.

We admit that only God's mercy can make space for peace. Only the God who is beyond time can speak to our urgency. We turn to the one who regulates and guides both the mysteries of heaven and the realities of earthly life.

We see that only the creator and lover of the cosmos can help. We believe that the Lord of the universe is able to hold all things, including the overwhelming heaviness of our world. The quest for peace in our time begins in the spiritual realm. It insists, first of all, that we stay open to spiritual strength and transformation. It calls on our willingness to be in the presence of God and to pray.

An Episcopal priest tells about a moment where the pain of this world intersected with prayer in a particularly meaningful way for him. He was praying the words of today's collect when he learned about a school shooting near him. The tragedy struck him especially because it was nearby, because he knew someone who had graduated from that school. But he also realized that he could easily recall the response to previous shootings as well. He thought about how some people would offer their thoughts and prayers, and others would counter that thoughts and prayers were a hollow answer. He writes that he fears we are on the verge of an era in which things are so politicized that as Christians we forget what a powerful force prayer is.

Of course, our prayers can and should move and inspire and strengthen us to work for peace. But we must always begin by turning to God. The priest invites us to add our prayers to the unending prayers for peace in our world. In this story we hear echoes of many others, of all too familiar stories of war and violence and inhumanity, some close by and some in places we couldn't find on a map. There's a nearly constant stream of disturbing, discouraging news. We would love never to hear or live these stories again. Our most heartfelt prayers are not yet fulfilled. We might be slightly amused that the same priest who tells us to pray right now and that prayer is effective also speaks to us about joining our prayers with the unending prayers for the peace of the world.

We find ourselves standing with all those who have asked for peace and who are still watching and waiting for a response. Can we resist becoming hopeless? Can we believe that the one who called the world into being is working to make everything whole again? Can we add our voice to those crying out for calm and safety? Can we trust that God is active deep within us guiding our spirit and our feet into the way of peace? Will we indeed pray for peace in our time? Archbishop Desmond Tutu gives an answer to the question we might be asking. So why should we pray in a world gone mad? Because our faithful prayers can change the world. How do we pray in a world gone mad with persistence, confidence and joy, humility and repentance? May we pray for a world gone mad. Recently a writer wondered what it would be like to wake up one morning and discover that the world was finally and completely at peace. Take a moment to let yourself imagine waking up to that reality. Let yourself experience that absolute peace. Have the courage and faith to embrace that hope and then with your whole being pray for peace in our time. Amen.