

Heart of Worship: God Leaves You with Peace!

A sermon based on John 14:23-27

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you were seeing a person for the last time, what would you want to be your last words? I went online and found some famous last words from throughout history. Here's some of what I found:

Author T.S. Eliot was only able to whisper one word as he died: "Valerie," the name of his wife. Football coach Vince Lombardi died of cancer in 1970. As he died, Lombardi turned to his wife Marie and said, "Happy anniversary. I love you." John Wayne died at age 72 in L.A. He turned to his wife and said, "Of course I know who you are. You're my girl. I love you."

You can pretty well guess what was on their mind as they passed, what message they wanted to convey. Of course, not everyone was thinking about the love of their life in their last moments. Nathan Hale (who fun fact, is one of my ancestors)...Nathan Hale, right before he was hung for spying on the British in the Revolutionary War, famously said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." His love was his patriotism...his love was his country.

Martin Luther confessed, "We are beggars; this is true!"...pointing people to our loving Lord and the riches of his grace he's storing up for us in heaven.

You know, maybe we don't even need to go down the death route. But if you knew you'd be speaking to a person for the last time, what would you say? "I would say good-bye." "I would tell him/her how much I love them." "I would make sure they know they can call me whenever they want to; I'm always there for them." "I would tell them good luck and God's blessings on their next endeavor."

What would you say?

Friends, today we're finishing up our Heart of Worship sermon series, and what better way to end than with the ending of our worship, the Benediction (a fancy word, meaning to bestow a blessing on someone). And, here it is: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord grant you his favor and give you peace."

That's the last thing God has to say to you here in worship. They're words we heard earlier, in our first lesson...the words of the very same blessing God gave to his chosen people, the Israelites...the blessing he's still giving to his chosen people 3,500 years later...to his chosen people here, you and me. And week after week, this blessing remains the same. You might even know it so well you could recite it in your sleep.

But think about this...why is it here...in our worship, yes, but also at the end of our worship? And why is the very last thing God says to us...why does God want to leave you and me with peace?

Look around you. You know, we might not experience it all that often in our little corner of the world, but we're not oblivious to what's going on in our world. No major wars going on right now, but there are definitely countries in our world today not getting along (to put it nicely). Political...civil unrest...coups taking place. Terrorist attacks every so often, just to make sure you remember ISIS is out there and is a real threat. The Olympics, just a few weeks ago, a grand picture of what things could look

like if we all just got along with each other, but even they masked the political turmoil going on in Brazil, going through the process of impeaching their president, who was deliberately hiding Brazil's real problem, economic woes.

We're not oblivious to what's going on in our own country, either. Right now, the political scene...politicians and government leaders, some of whom are trying to paint this rosy picture of how our country is progressing towards better days. Candidates, slinging mud at each other, making pie in the sky promises of how they can fix our nation's problems, make us great again, be able to restore peace. Loud cries of minority oppression and police brutality (some of it valid, but a lot of it seemingly over-sensationalizing a few select occurrences).

We're not oblivious to what's going on in our own community, either. In the midst of a budget "crisis," which trickles down to us. Crime is just as prominent here, too. Just this past week, there was a police-involved shooting (fatal), and before the details of the situation even got out, some people seemed ready to crucify, or at the very least, protest against local law enforcement and their "incompetence."

I'd ask you to imagine this life without peace, but, to one extent or another, we're already living it...in our own lives as well. Stress in marriages, parents and children not getting along, fighting with friends, frustrations at work...the list goes on.

Well, God looks around and sees the same thing we do, but he also sees below the surface as well. He knows the lack of peace between you and others in your life. He knows the lack of peace between you and him.

You know, it's tempting to just go about this life our own way, falter here and there, but no big deal, things are still fine with God. "I'm not a 100% truthful, everyone's got their own secrets, but I know God's not really mad about the few times I lie." "I'll admit, the thoughts I have in my mind, whether they're selfish, lustful, angry, hateful," but I don't act out on them, so it's not a big deal, right?" "I screwed up big...I definitely sinned there, but I know everything is fine between me and God."

It's easy for us to want to smooth over our sins and just assume our relationship with God is fine. It's nothing new. Read the book of Jeremiah sometime. At the onset of the Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem, and God was using him to warn his people how they should get comfortable in Babylon (where they were being taken because of their sinful rebellion against God). But they were going to be there for a while. Listen to how God described the lies the false prophets were spinning: **"They dress the wounds of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."** Twice in Isaiah, God echoes the same sentiments, **"There is no peace for the wicked."**

Imagine a relationship with God without peace, because that's what we ought to have. The Bible tells us, **"You iniquities have separated you from God, your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear."** Sure doesn't sound like everything is ok with him.

Imagine an eternity without God...without peace. That's what we ought to have.

So, again, why does God want to leave you and me with peace? Because that's what we so desperately need. Not peace in the world...not peace in our community...not even peace within our own personal relationships. Above anything else, we need peace.

Listen to Jesus' words today, ***"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."***

Do you know when Jesus spoke these words? He was with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. So on the eve of the most violent day of Jesus' earthly life and the most heart-wrenching day for his disciples since he called them, Jesus had only one thing on his mind. Jesus gave them peace. And with everything that took place over the next 24 hours, he gave you peace, too.

Just think of what Jesus said while on the cross, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** Why have you abandoned me, left me alone, walked away, separated yourself from me? Because he was bearing our sins. Perfect Jesus, who his entire life had never done anything wrong, who had the perfect, peaceful relationship with his heavenly Father, took our sins, and there, on the cross, he experienced the separation from God we deserve. He took all our sins that separate us from God and he made them his own. And in our place, he experienced hell. And as Jesus cried out, ***"It is finished!"*** all that was left...all that he left us was peace. The peace the angels had sang about at his birth, "peace between God and man," Jesus achieved that peace, the peace of sins forgiven, through his life, his death, and his resurrection. He achieved that peace for you.

And you know what's great about this peace? Jesus promised it to his disciples. He promised it to us. But it's more than a promise. It's real. There's no contradiction between promise and reality. Jesus' peace is not the same as the world's peace. It doesn't depend on harmony between countries and tranquility in families. It isn't as fragile as the next temper flare-up or grab for power. It isn't disturbed by plans gone awry. Even Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion couldn't cancel it. It's real...and it's yours.

Jesus' peace calms troubled hearts and makes fearful hearts confident. His peace transcends human understanding and sustains us in all condition. His peace keeps us at one with God and serene in our salvation. We need not be afraid or overcome by troubled hearts. We have peace from Jesus. Because Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose, God shines his face on you. He is gracious to you. He grants you his favor. And nothing...nothing can disturb that peace as long as we love Jesus.

You might notice before Jesus promised his disciples, and us, his peace, he had some other encouragement for his disciples, and us, ***"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching...he who does not love me will not obey my teaching."***

There's a follow-up to Jesus' peace. He leaves it to us freely, but he also wants us to respond. How? We who love Jesus will obey his teaching. We will live for Jesus in everything at every time.

We get to hear similar encouragement at the end of our worship, with the words, ***"Brothers and sisters, go in peace, live in harmony with one another, serve the Lord with gladness."***

It's easy to skip over that part, to just think about the peace we have with Jesus, but to just leave it at that...to forget about how Jesus' peace and forgiveness empowers us to leave and serve him.

So, what a great reminder, after all of worship, which, as we've seen throughout the last 11 weeks of our sermon series and everything we've learned about our worship, all of it encourages, enables, and empowers us for this very moment, to leave this place and "go in peace, live in harmony with one another, serve the Lord with gladness." And all God's people say, "Amen!" Yes, we will do this.

We won't do it perfectly. This week you and I will fail to serve God perfectly. But in those times, remember God's last words to you, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord grant you his favor and give you peace." Remember his last word, "peace." In Christ, it's yours. And in peace, keep serving God.

Famous last words...blues singer Bessie Smith died saying, "I'm going, but I'm going in the name of the Lord." You don't ever know if this is going to be the last time you're with this/that person again. Lord-willing, I will see you here again next Sunday. But if not, take this with you, God's words with you. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord grant you his favor and give you peace." You are on God's mind and in his heart. God leaves you with peace.

And you leave with an amen...yes, God, I am refreshed, I am prepared, I am eager to go and serve you. Amen.