



*Peace Passing All Understanding*  
October 11, 2020: The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Oh God, take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts, and set them on fire. Amen.*

It was the fall of 1987. I was a depressed graduate student, having just broken up with a longtime girlfriend, and experiencing what I later learned was clinical depression. As a way out of the hole, I started singing in the Brown University Chapel Choir, directed by a faithful Episcopal Christian named Cathy. She could see a spiritual seeker a mile away, and she invited me to her church on Sunday morning.

Among other things, what pierced me to my very soul that morning was the final blessing given by the Dean of the Cathedral in Providence, RI: “The peace of God which passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord.” I pretty much stopped listening after hearing the phrase “the peace of God which passeth all understanding,” because peace is what I was in desperate need of. All very first world, graduate student ailments: depression, love sickness, anxiety about the future... But nonetheless, debilitating, dispiriting, discouraging.

And the peace that passes understanding, the peace that didn’t make any sense but was there—I wanted that worst way. That yearning for peace was followed by baptism six months later.

Peace that doesn’t make any sense; hope which seems out of place; courage where faint-heartedness would be understandable. Many of us need that right now. And even if we don’t, we know those who do, even if only reading about them in the newspaper. I’m reminded of a spiritual from an Aretha Franklin album I have—“I’ve been in the storm too long; I need a little more time to pray.” For so many, that is the case. Radiating out from the center of the pandemic, rippling out from struggles for justice, thundering out from fires and hurricanes, and the never-ending maelstrom of political outrage—we need that peace which passes all understanding.

I’m bleakly mindful that tomorrow is the day that is called Columbus Day by many. For others it is known as Native Peoples or Indigenous Peoples Day. For native peoples, the arrival of Columbus and the Europeans that came behind him initiated centuries of slaughter. No two ways about it. I’m also gratefully mindful that Needham town meeting last Sunday overwhelmingly passed a resolution directing town leadership to commence a systematic and comprehensive examination of the racial dynamics in Needham as a precondition to execute solutions to root causes of racial injustice. So, we are in the midst of a storm—historical, current, medical, political. *And* there are points of peace in the midst of it.

We are gifted this morning with passages of Scripture which come to us straight from the center of the storm, and which point toward peace. Our ancestors in faith recorded their experience of the mighty presence of the living God in the midst of all their tumultuous histories. That same presence is available for us.



*Peace Passing All Understanding*

October 11, 2020: The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

We have a beautiful passage from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah stands as a giant astride the Hebrew Bible, especially for Christians. Sometimes it is called the 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel, so often is it quoted in the Gospels. Handel's masterful oratorio, *Messiah*, contains more texts from Isaiah than any other book of Scripture. <https://jubalslyre.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Text-Study-of-Handels-Messiah.pdf> Isaiah was composed over a long period of Israel's history. Though the original prophet Isaiah lived in northern Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, the composition of the completed book, which included subsequent prophets writing in his name and in his tradition, wasn't finalized until the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus. The book contains warnings against idolatry, against exploitation of the poor, the widow, children, against injustice, suggesting divine and fearsome consequences if such a transgressions of God's law continue.

We note that during that stretch of time, the Jewish people endured conquests by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, with the Babylonians sacking Jerusalem and destroying the Temple. And yet Isaiah also provides promises of God's supreme provision, the destruction of ruthless nations, sheltering and shading of the poor, stilling the song of the ruthless. Of peace amidst the storm. The middle of this passage is often used in funerals: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people feast of rich food;" ... "the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces." With all that Israel had experienced—the pain and suffering and destruction, still, they could affirm their experience of living with a bountiful God in the center of it all.

And the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, also so often read at funerals: "Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Though art with me, thy rod and my staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies." Again, the Psalmist proclaims his experience of the living God at the very center of his distress. A peace that seems to make no sense. We are invited to examine our own experience to discover the peace of the Lord in unexpected places amidst our times of discouragement.

And the letter from Paul to the Philippians—we've been working our way through this letter in bits and pieces over the past few weeks. Paul wrote this letter from prison, most likely in Rome, where he will eventually be martyred under the emperor Nero. He writes to reassure the church in Philippi that he is still in one piece, to commend the return of his trusty companion Epaphroditus to Philippi, to encourage them in the face of persecution, and to mediate conflict. Precisely what the conflict is between these two women, we do not know; but Paul also uses this occasion to praise them for their work in the Gospel beside him and other followers in the Jesus movement.

This is Paul, who not only is in prison, but who has been flogged, beaten with rods, been shipwrecked three times, spent a day and a night afloat in the open sea. He has been cold and hungry and naked and alone. (see 1 Corinthians 11) And in the midst of it all, he has learned to pray prayers of thanksgiving and of petition to God so fervently that he comes to know that peace of God which passes all understanding, the peace in the midst of the storm that makes no sense. Rejoice, he says, rejoice! He commends the sense that God is with him even in the most dire and despairing circumstances of danger,



*Peace Passing All Understanding*

October 11, 2020: The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

heartbreak, and sorrow. It's a peace that guards our hearts and minds with the love and strength of Jesus Christ. The Lord is near, Paul reminds us.

That's the peace I hungered for in 1987 as a discouraged young man, that I still hunger for, and I daresay, we all hunger for, for it's not a "one and done" kind of a peace. It's a peace that sends us out to love our neighbors in the midst of their storms, our storms, our heartbreaks, our illnesses. It requires us to practice rejoicing! as Paul says, letting God know our prayers and supplications with thanksgiving in EVERYTHING—all situations, wherever we find ourselves, in all things. We do this as individuals, and especially as the gathered Church in times of anxiety, unrest, and injustice. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

In these next days and weeks, may we hold, and practice, this life-giving truth together.

**Amen.**