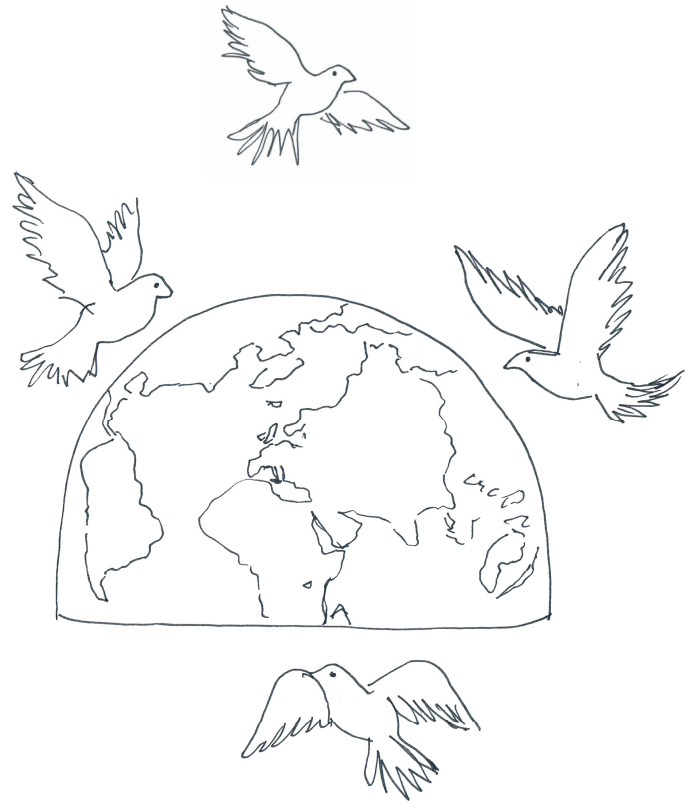
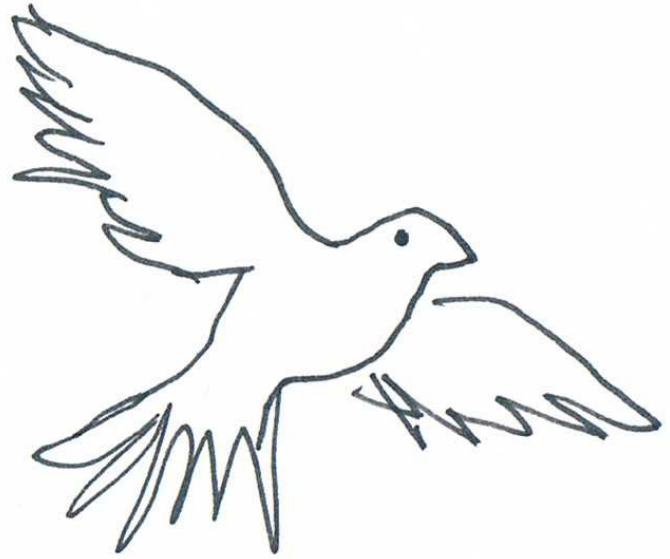


PEACE DEVOTIONAL



American Baptist Churches of CT

October 2013



Illustrations by
The Reverend Lisabeth Gustafson

Day 31

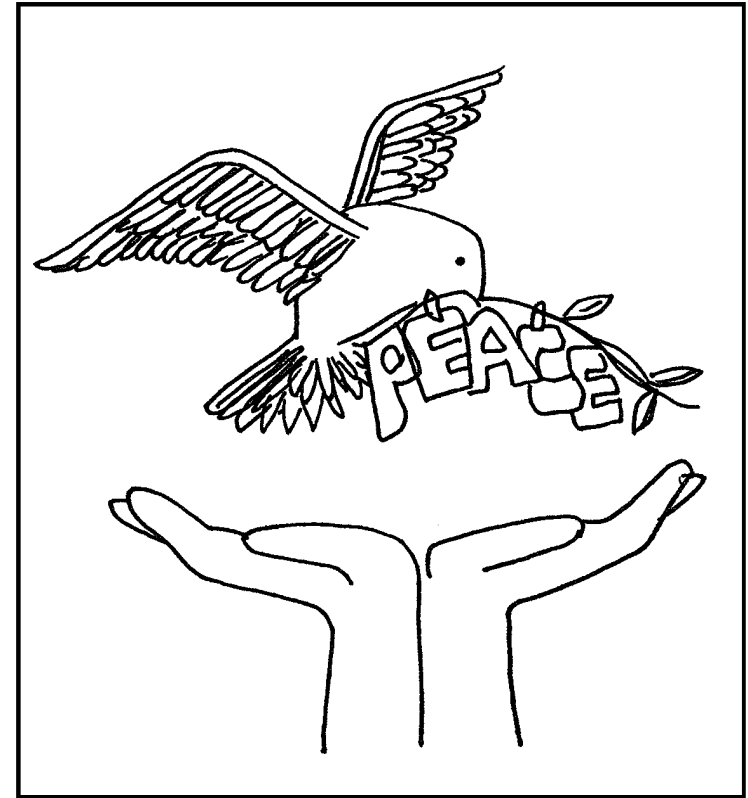
So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.
Romans 14:19

Regarding questions of religious liberty Paul asserts that pursuing rest instead of strife and a state of untroubled, undisturbed well-being is our common pursuit rather than straining at menus.

An absence of peace comes when I assert my freedom at the expense of yours. Jacques Ellul writes in “The Ethics of Freedom,” “The familiar struggles for freedom are all struggles for personal freedom even when it is alleged that the freedom of others is sought. What we see everywhere without exception is the ferocity of individual conquest which establishes my freedom (individual or collective) at the expense of the bondage of others or another group. ... Christian freedom, however, leads to a very different attitude. The Christian has not to fight for his own freedom, for, having been freed in Christ, he is already free and external conditions are no longer so important.”

Grasping the reality of our freedom in Christ can help equip us to pursue the things which make for peace and build others up as we loosen our grasp on the external conditions so often at the center of our lack of peace and the presence of strife or unrest. Peace is to be at rest; when I stop demanding my rights, my way in the body of Christ and am freed to pursue the things which make for peace and to be at rest, those around me are also given the gift of peace and growing spiritual vitality.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, help us to grow in understanding our freedom in you; fill me with your Spirit that I might pursue and embrace the things which make for peace and relinquish demands for my way. Amen.



Week 1:

Peace with God

Day 1

Isaiah 9:6

Friends, the possibility of peace exists. We see it in today's scripture. The prophet Isaiah tells us that "unto us a child will be born." Unto us!! – that is you and me. This child is not for one group or one nation, or one section of the population. He will be born for all.

The second piece of good news is that, among other things, this child will be "the prince of peace." As you may know the Hebrew word for peace is shalom, which is a full, rich word and its meaning is much broader than just the absence of war. It is a word that implies a peace within our souls, our own well-being and that of others.

We see a lot of violence around us – on the news, in movies. Teachers witness violence in schools. Law enforcement sees violence on the streets. Those who work in emergency rooms witness the consequences of violence. Many of our military are in very violent parts of our world. We are part of a violent culture.

These words from Isaiah help us to begin to see a new way, a better way, by following this Prince of Peace.

PRAYER: Holy God, help us to open our hearts enough to see the possibilities offered by the Prince of Peace who we claim as our Lord and Savior. Guide us as we try to make a difference in our world so that we might truly live as people of peace. Amen.

Day 30

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4.1-3

What would happen if we really took this seriously? A revolution, I think. Look at what happened when the early Christians did take these things to heart. We are told in Acts 2.46-47: *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

We look back in wonder at the remarkable growth of the earliest Christian church described in the book of Acts. Today, with so many churches struggling just to maintain themselves, it's easy to get obsessed with finding a way for our churches to grow numerically. "Church Growth" has become a thriving business enterprise with expert consultants, conferences, speakers, books and videos. But maybe, just maybe, things are simpler than that. Maybe if we in the church treated one another "*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" we too in our day might experience the revolutionary power of the Spirit. I think our world is literally dying searching for communities of humility and gentleness; tolerant of each other and working hard to maintain our bond of peace, which is a mark of God's Spirit working among us.

PRAYER: I'm asking you today God, in a way I haven't before, make me an instrument of your peace. Amen.

Day 29

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the sons of God.
Matthew 5:9*

This is certainly one of the better known verses whenever our minds turn to the thought of peace. But just how are you and I “peacemakers?”

The wonderful song *Let There Be Peace on Earth* always haunts me as well. I recall quite vividly the first time I sang it with a church choir in Philippi, West Virginia when I was in college during the Vietnam War era when there was considerable cry for peace and end to war.

So many times we believe that if only there was an absence of conflict there would be peace. That is rarely possible at best and ultimately will not bring true peace. True peace is only attainable on a personal level and, as most of us who call ourselves Christians have discovered, that peace only comes to fruition in our relationship with God through Christ. We continually are bombarded with strife in our lives – at home, at work in the community, when lives are taken (Sandy Hook) or battle breaks out in some remote area of our world (Egypt) but affects us daily. Peace is only found in being able to know where to turn when our hearts are being torn apart – Jesus Christ who can bring peace in the midst of horror and grief.

One of the lines of the song *Let There Be Peace* says: “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” We bring peace to others when we are confident in our own peace. The passage from Matthew makes sense then: we’re blessed as we bless others and become true “sons of God.” Be peacemakers!

PRAYER: O God, source of true peace, “let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” Amen.

Day 2

Matthew 11: 28-30

Whenever I read this passage I want to breathe deeply in order to rest in the Lord. Inhale...exhale... Inhale the loving presence of God...exhale all the stresses and anxieties of the day. This is a great passage to read at the end of the day or just as you are going to bed for the night.

The theme this week is Peace with God. In order to find “peace with God” we must be in a relationship with the Creator. Whether you are a parent taking your children to school and going to work, or whether you are retired and active in multiple volunteer activities, we sometimes find it hard to sit back and relax and “rest in the Lord”.

The question then becomes, what is the burden or “yoke” that you have? Is it work, is it an illness, a broken relationship, a secret that is weighing down your heart? Maybe it is an employment stress or family concern. Whatever it may be, Jesus offers solace and care and unconditional love. The yoke that he offers is not burdensome. The life he offers to us is not one that weighs us down; rather it lifts us up for we know that in the Lord, all things are possible.

Jesus’ yoke is one that empowers us to breathe deeply in the richness of His mercy and grace. Inhale... exhale.

PRAYER: Loving God, keep us mindful of the peace that you offer that passes all understanding. May we once again make those steps of taking on your yoke so that we might find peace with you. Amen.

Day 3

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.*

Numbers 6:24-26

Benediction: to bless; a blessing; an invocation for divine help, blessing, and guidance; literally, to speak (diction) well (bene). This scripture is a familiar one to me because I have often heard it spoken as a benediction at the end of a worship service. It is at various times reassuring, hopeful, or challenging: that God is with me now; that God will walk with me in the days ahead; that it is I who must remember that God is with me, that God is with us.

The Lord blesses, but who carries that blessing in spoken language? We do. Our words are the vehicle on which the blessing rides. We can speak well and our mere words can be a conduit for God's blessing. God uses us to bring the spirit of peace to each other.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for the gift of speech. Thank you for your spirit which can flow through our speech to bless each other. Please help us to be messengers of your peace. Amen.

Day 28

Ephesians 2:17

Almost thirty years ago I preached at a Methodist church here in Connecticut as part of a clergy exchange Sunday during Christian Unity Week. Imagine my surprise when I was taken through the basement hallways of the church to get to the sanctuary only to walk by large barrels that had been stored there in case of a nuclear holocaust. The barrels had already been there for over twenty years. Seriously, would you really want to eat those saltine crackers? I laughed when I walked by the barrel labeled "toilet paper". Nothing like getting your priorities in order.

The theme this week is promoting peace and that takes much more work than storing up for war. It takes energy and drive and stamina and endurance to work for peace in our families, our churches, our communities and in our world.

Perhaps we should be storing up for peace. I wonder what those barrels would include. Would they have kindness and generosity? How about vulnerability and humility or even flexibility and openness?

The apostle Paul writes that Jesus came to proclaim peace to those nearby and those far away. Those words are timeless as they came right out of Isaiah's mouth eons before Jesus was even born.

The task is now ours, to represent Jesus and to speak his words of peace to those who are right in our circles as well as to those who are in faraway lands. Are you up for the task? Jesus is the one who gives us the strength to continue his work.

PRAYER: Holy God, we come today thinking about the ways to promote peace in our world. We pray for creativity and hope as we seek to continue your work here in our 21st century world. Amen.

Day 27
Luke 6:27

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Easier said than done, my friends. My mother used to tell me that I should treat others in the same way I would want to be treated. (v. 31) For the longest time I thought those were her original words, not scripture! (I actually thought a lot of her common statements were original only to find them in scripture.)

These two lines are similar – if we are truly able to treat others in the way we want to be treated then one would hope we would be able to follow Jesus’ directive to “love our enemies.”

So the telling question to ponder is this: Who is your enemy? Does the enemy have a name or is the enemy a group or system that believes differently than you do? Is the enemy the great unknown that may scare you or me?

Perhaps the first step to a different place in our lives is also found in Jesus’ words and that is when he said that we are to pray for those persons. It is a little hard to hate someone when you are praying for them, don’t you think? Prayer is a power unto itself and sometimes all times that is what we must rely on.

PRAYER: Loving God, who loves all your children, help us to learn to pray for those who are different from us, who may have diverse opinions. Guide us to move away from our own egos to be able to reach out to those with whom we have disagreements. Amen.

Day 4

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Romans 5.1*

What is a Christian? Like many Christians you might say, someone who does good to others, or one who loves others, someone who seeks justice or pursues peace. Or perhaps in your definition you would highlight specifically "religious" behaviors like prayer and worship in Jesus name, reading the Bible and tithing. What I want to suggest is that these are all good things that, one hopes, Christians do. We might even want to say that this is what a faithful Christian is like. But is it what a Christian is?

In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul points us in a different direction. According to today's verse, a Christian is someone who has peace with God. The focus is on what God has done for us, rather than on what we do or ought to do. Through Jesus Christ we are brought by God into a good and right relationship with God; that is what it means to be justified. To have faith means we rely on what God has done, at peace with God, knowing God is at peace with us.

PRAYER: What can I say but thank you Lord for your wonderful gift of peace. Amen.

Day 5

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace – in peace because they trust in you.
Isaiah 26: 3 (NRSV)

The word that catches in my mind from this verse is “steadfast”. I sure do want a steadfast mind. I looked it up in Webster’s Dictionary and it says that steadfast means “fixed or unchanging: steady, firmly loyal or constant: unswerving”. I am afraid I do not always have a “steadfast” mind according to these definitions. Sometimes in life my faith wavers, I have doubts, I become fearful, and I am not very steadfast.

When I looked up this verse in Hebrew, I found the word used for steadfast to be “samak”. It means “to sustain, to uphold, to be braced, to lean upon, to rely upon, to gain confidence. “ The way I understand “steadfast” from these definitions is that it is more about who I am leaning on that makes me steadfast, than about how strong I am standing on my own. My steadfast mind comes from leaning on, or relying on, or bracing myself on God.

There is a comic strip called Rose Is Rose where the main character every now and then goes out to lean against her “Let things be tree” when life gets to be a little bit too much to handle. She leans on the tree until she has rested and regained her strength to face the problems of life. Thankfully we as children of God, have so much more than a tree to lean against. We can lean against the Creator of the Universe. I believe God keeps us in peace as we learn to lean on, rely on, to brace ourselves on God.

PRAYER: Thank you God for your grace and forgiveness when our faith (and mind) is not so steadfast. We praise you our Rock, our Lord, our Savior, our Creator, our Place to Lean”. Amen.



Week 5:

Promoting Peace

Day 26

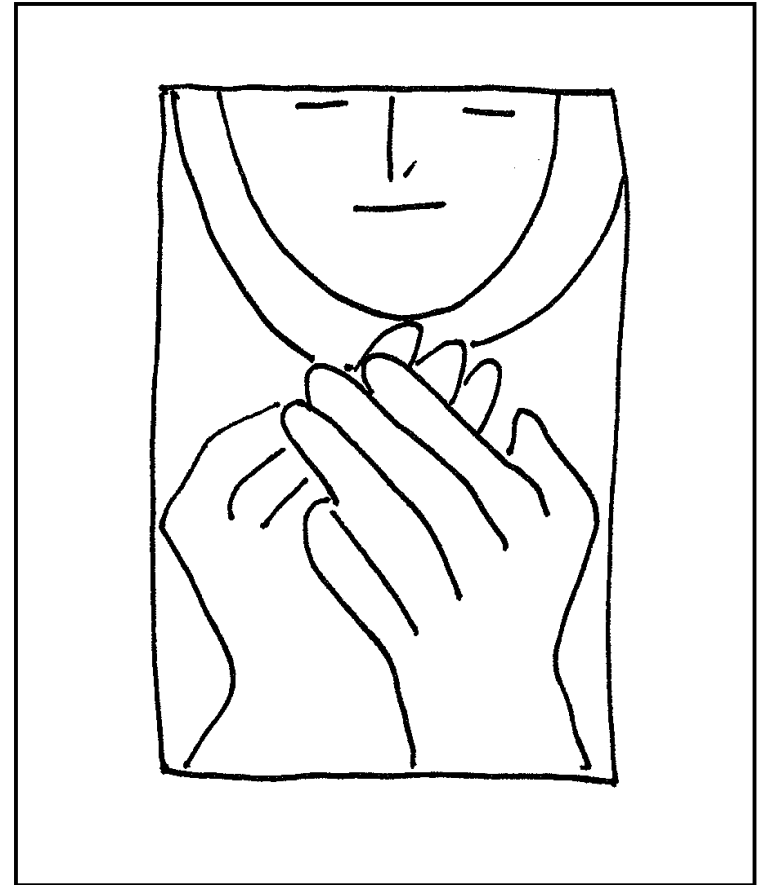
Romans 8:18 – 25

The patient had talked with me about various health and family problems. When I asked, “What would you like me to pray for today?” I thought she would have me focus on one of the issues raised. She thought for a moment and then said, “Peace..... Peace in the world.” She elaborated that without world peace everything else ends up compromised, that people learn violence and harbor grudges and feel entitled or feel shame; that societies spend their resources on weapons and go to bed fearful. So, even though she was perhaps near her own death, she wanted me to pray for peace and reconciliation of the nations.

I am often humbled by the generosity of spirit that I encounter in the hospital. My own prayers often go towards the personal, to the protection of family and friends, to deliverance from illness or comfort for the afflicted. World peace has been on the back burner, mentioned periodically and somewhat vaguely. But this patient reminded me, taught me, the importance of bringing the big picture before God and not just our own personal details. We prayed for the peoples of the world, for the healing of hurts, for the forgiveness of others and selves and nations, for reconciliation.

At the end of the prayer, she smiled. Praying for the big picture, for peace in the world, brought peace to her heart. The problems of her life were somehow touched as she brought to God the problems of the world. How often do we find that when we pray for the other, for the situation ‘out there’ that we find our own pains addressed and our longings satisfied? So today, whatever it is that you are facing, let your prayer expand out to cover the agony of the world, for it was for the whole world that Christ died.

PRAYER: Gracious God, help all of us to find in our hearts the urge to be reconciled, so that the decisions of leaders and the aspirations of citizens might be united in forging a peaceful world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Week 2:

Being at Peace

Day 6
Romans 8:6

This verse is the turning point of Paul's discussion of the perils of living a life of the flesh and the freedom and peace that comes from living in the Spirit. Living a life that only serves to gratify our animal needs and desires sets us apart from God's Realm and sets us over and against our fellow brothers and sisters in this world. In this wealthiest of countries we live lives that are out-sized compared to most of the rest of the world. We demand cheap consumer goods manufactured by adults and children who die in factory collapses and mining accidents, are enslaved in agricultural fields, and are part of a 3 billion strong workforce earning less than \$2 per day. We drive luxurious cars, build bigger homes, and have closets stuffed with clothes. We shop and dine in establishments that pay far less than a living wage and rarely offer full time employment, while corporate executives are paid millions per year. These are some of the more apparent 'sins of the flesh'.

Paul reminds us that Jesus came to condemn these fleshly pursuits so that we might live in righteousness and have the Law fulfilled in us. This we can only do if we are living lives according to the Spirit, loving God and our neighbor as ourself.

To live a life of peace is to be aware of our own legitimate needs and those of all other people on the planet, and to make choices that reflect our values as disciples of Jesus. As we struggle together to reorient our lives toward the Spirit, we may discover the meaning of the Psalmist's words, "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).

PRAYER: O Lord, help me learn the discipline of being a servant to others first and in so doing find the mystery of Life in the Spirit. Amen.

Day 25

*Bless those who persecute you;
Bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice,
Weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another;
Do not be haughty,
But associate with the lowly;
Do not claim to be wiser than you are.
Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
Live peaceably with all.*

Romans 12:14-18

I like the attention these words give to "all", the implication being to people like us and not like us, of all faiths or no faith, all ethnicities, all skin colors, all customs, all life styles. We can – and are encouraged to! – rejoice with people who are rejoicing and to weep with people who are weeping. Paul implores us not to be haughty and set ourselves apart, but to live with humility in community with all people, to look to the higher good, "what is noble in the sight of all", and to try our best to live peaceably with all people.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, remind us to be humble and see every person as a child of God. Remind us that we are connected with every living soul and help us live with respect and consideration toward everyone. Amen.

Day 24

Mark 9:50

I have a friend who had been put on a strict diet for health reasons – not uncommon for many of us. After about a month on this diet his comment about the whole thing was, “no salt, no sugar, no flavor.”

The theme for this week is “living in peace with one another.” In this scripture Jesus tells us that we need to “have salt” and to be at peace. A “salty” person is sometimes seen as one who does not mince words, one who is honest and forthright. We do not often couple that with being at peace so this is a bit confusing.

Salt is an important mineral for the human body, but too little or too much is not a good thing. The trick seems to be in finding balance between not enough and too much.

So it is also with our words and with the relationships we have with others. Being able to live in peace with others requires us to find a balance in words that allows us to speak our understanding of the truth without destroying the peace we have. It is the human dilemma that filled the mailboxes of all the Dear Abby types as folks try to sort that same thing out in their lives.

In my world it is only by the grace of God that we can even begin to think about that balance. Life is short and as we have seen so often in this violent culture, it is often too short for many. Our days are numbered according to scripture, and I for one will seek to find ways to speak the truth in love but continue to find avenues to do it in a way that promotes peace in my heart and in the hearts of those with whom I have a relationship. Shall we try together?

PRAYER: O God, grant us your peace. Give us wisdom to be able to speak of your love in ways that promote peace. Amen.

Day 7

Psalm 29:11

In this one sentence we find that the Psalmist has written two words that are not usually put together in the same sentence: strength and peace. To me strength connotes might while peace describes at least in part, a sense of harmony. While their meanings are much more complex than those one word descriptors, it makes me pause to see them together.

The theme for this week is “being at peace”. My sense is that in order to have peace in the world, we must start with being at peace with ourselves. Many centuries ago Thomas A. Kempis wrote, “Be at peace with yourself first and then you will be able to bring peace to others.”

How does one do this? How do we keep our head on our shoulders when the world is in disarray? How do we stay calm in the midst of crisis? Each person must find their own way, but I believe the beginning point has to be with the understanding of God’s presence in our midst regardless of what life gives us. It is God who gives us the strength to be able to be at peace.

PRAYER: Almighty God, creator of the universe and all that is within, grant us your grace and mercy so that we might be able to be at peace in our hearts. We pray for strength when the days are hard, when the news overwhelms us, and when we are inundated with hatred and anger. May we be your peacemakers in our world. Amen.

Day 8
Philippians 4:6-7

Here is one thing I know for sure: GOD is concerned with every single aspect of my life. It is so amazing to think that the GOD who created the universe in all its glory is concerned about all of my little details. And in those moments when worry overtakes my thoughts, GOD is there to bring peace of mind and spirit.

When my mother was dying I expected to feel such a deep sense of grief and loss. But as I lived through those days I realized I was feeling a peace that was indescribable. It seemed crazy in some ways at the time, but quiet and calm as I had never experienced before flowed through me and is with me still three years later.

The world cannot give you this peace. It can't be found in the latest self help books or any other material or human way. I know. I have tried the quick fixes. This peace comes from GOD through our Lord Jesus Christ. It never ceases to amaze me what happens when I let Christ pull away the worry at the center of my life.

Sometimes life is tough, but thankfully God is with us every step of the way, lending us a peace that is bigger than anything we can ever comprehend!

PRAYER: Gracious God, keep us from being anxious about every little thing. Help us to open our hearts and minds so that your peace fills our hearts and minds with an indescribable peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 23

(Expanded Bible) People who work for peace in a peaceful way plant a good crop of right living [or Peacemakers who sow with peace will harvest a crop of justice/righteousness.]

James 3:18

Those who seek peace through right living mirror good works and set examples for those around them. Peacemakers truly love their neighbors in word and deed, extending goodwill through their communities and towns and even spreading harmony into the whole land and far reaches of the earth!

Sow the seeds of peace so that our entire world may reap a harvest of joy and that justice will triumph. Scoop up the inner yearnings of our souls to be united in one spirit, connected to our Lord.

PRAYER: Lord, my prayer this day is that each one of us might individually spread your peaceful word throughout the world in our daily lives with our family, our community, our town, our county, our state and land. Let it seep into each soul throughout the universe – one peaceful, spirit filled moment at a time. Amen.

Day 22

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

2 Corinthians 13:11

So no one's perfect. No one can exhibit peace, patience, love and the other five attributes that Paul encourages us to embrace in Galatians 5. After all, we're human.

However, peace in our hearts can overflow to our minds, our words, our emotions, our actions, the way we handle life in general. It can become contagious in a good way, "caught" by our family and friends, and maybe even our church and community.

But this state of being isn't without its drawbacks: Warning, you could be called upon as a peacemaker. And peacemaking isn't for the faint of heart. Being at peace doesn't mean you have to be someone's footstool or doormat, either.

Yet having a peaceful nature, listening ear and forgiving heart can quietly go miles in helping people heal relationships, compromise, make decisions with others in mind, spark communication, resolve problems.

It's impossible to change everything or fix every problem, whether under our roof, in our churches or in war-torn countries. However, the peace and love that we ignite in our little corner of the world can become a flame, much as the light of Christ.

PRAYER: Lord, may we all strive to be peacemakers in whatever capacity you call us. With you, we won't be afraid. Amen.

Day 9

John 14:27

One of my most favorite sayings of Jesus is this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." But it is one of my favorite sayings with just a hint of irony and sarcasm. Because every single time Jesus tells his disciples to not let their "hearts be troubled", it is in the middle of a time they should appropriately and absolutely be troubled. In John 14, Jesus is preparing his followers for the soon approaching time when he will no longer be with them and tells them not to be afraid. Yes, he is leaving them behind, but not leaving them empty handed. Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

Peace. Have you ever felt the word "peace"? Not heard it, but felt it. Peace is a gift. And it is so much more than the absence of conflict or discomfort. Peace not only implies comfort but also wholeness, completeness, trust, faith, assurance. You may not be able to predict the outcome and it may not look like you expected, but you know in faith things will turn out alright. You have a *peace* about it. To feel peace, especially amidst a really tough time like the disciples were facing, is a rare and beautiful thing. And in the gospels, it is what Jesus brings first to his disciples before he dares to go any further. Peace will help them to be open enough to hear what Jesus needs and expects of his followers.

PRAYER: God who stills troubled waters and calms restless hearts, we are grateful for the gift of peace that offers us assurance, that restores our hope and gives us courage for the ministries you call us to in Jesus' name. May we have the grace today to live out of such a peace until we are able to bless the world in what we say and do, think and feel. Amen.

Day 10

For you will go out in Joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Isaiah 55: 12 (NIV)

Whenever we do a hymn-sing at our church I can almost guarantee you that one of our youth will call out the hymn based on this verse titled “The Trees of the Field”. It’s a great song that speaks of shouts of joy, the mountains and hills singing, the trees clapping their hands. It is full of joy from beginning to end. The one little line about peace almost gets swallowed up by all the joy; but there it is: “You shall go out with joy...and be led forth with peace. The NRSV says “For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.” It sounds as if it is a parade or something. There must be singing and dancing and partying...in peace!

That might be something like the “Boom Box” parade in the nearby town of Willimantic on the 4th of July. Anybody can be part of this parade. You put on some festive clothes, or drive a nifty car, or fire truck, or even septic truck, line up at 10 AM and start walking when someone tells you it’s your turn. It’s great fun for those who march and those who line the streets to watch. I marched in it for the first time this year. I even passed out candy along the way!

Peace is worth celebrating wherever we find it. When you hear a story of peace on the TV news, celebrate. Give thanks to God. When you hear of peace in a friend’s life, celebrate it, give thanks to God. When you experience peace in your life and heart and soul, celebrate it and give thanks to God. Peace, however and wherever we find it, is something to celebrate. Praise God for peace!

PRAYER: God please help us to open our eyes and hearts to peace. When we celebrate peace, we celebrate you. Amen.

Day 21

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

It’s impossible to live in peace with others if we don’t have peace within. Just as “charity begins at home,” so does peace. Yet peace, like love, must first dwell in the home of our hearts, before that speck can push down roots, send up a shoot, reach for the sun and bear fruit.

Peace with others - our families, our neighbors, our church community, our nation, our world - may feel unattainable and impossible. “Oh, it’s so hard to wait, so easy to hide because after all, what can little ole me do? Why bother?”

When I was growing up I did not have religious faith, did not know the Lord because my family did not believe. My father found God in the natural world, in a walk through the woods, touching a cool brook. I, too, find God in creation be it nature or artistic expression.

But throughout the first 35 years of my life, I was always looking for something else that I could not put my finger on. I looked in every inappropriate place and my dad would remind me, “Wherever you run, you must take yourself.”

I realize now I was seeking the peace within that can only be found in the Lord. It was not until I acknowledged and surrendered to God that I could be at peace at last and nourish that seed to eventually bear fruit outside myself. For that I’m forever thankful.

PRAYER: Lord, I didn’t know you were there but you were waiting patiently for me, for many of us. When life looks tumultuous – whether it is my personal problems or across the globe – may I only look for the peace you placed on my heart and go from there. Amen.

Day 20

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

Colossians 3.5

Why so serious? If you will go to your Bible and read the four verses that precede this one, you will see that God has it in mind to turn our lives into something glorious, or as Mother Theresa says, "something beautiful for God." The point is, don't let anything get in the way of that destiny. God has much, much better things in mind.

Well, how then do I do this; putting these disturbances of the soul away from me? The answer is to replace them with love. You will find this answer a little farther on in this passage, in verses fourteen and fifteen, *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.*

As Jesus said, love God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself. When we practice the ways of love, the evil and destructive is pushed out of lives. The disturbances will increasingly be replaced by peace.

PRAYER: Pour your powerful love upon me, O God, that I might live in your peace. Amen.

Day 11

Psalm 119:165

"All stressed out? Buy some peace." This was the title of an article I read in 'USA Today' recently. The article talked about how we Americans are so stressed out that we will try anything for relief, even if we have to pay for it. There are goggles to wear, pillows to sleep upon, massages, and drinks; the list of stress relieving items for sale goes on and on. The industry of helping us reach a state of peacefulness for the mind, body and soul has grown into a multi-billion dollar business. We are getting sick from this 'super stress' time that we live in, and it is costing us big bucks. But for all of his investigation, the writer comes to the conclusion that real peace cannot be bought, just as we cannot buy love.

God has given us His solution for peaceful living without the stresses of the world weighing us down; He ties it to our love for His word. "Great peace have those who love thy law; nothing can make them stumble." (RSV) In this passage the Psalm writer gives us a way to be at peace; we need to take God's word to heart. By obeying His commands and putting our hope in His promises, we get to have great peace. Jesus modeled that life of peace for us as we see His life through the scriptures: a life of serenity, calm and a deep assurance that His Heavenly Father was always with Him. It is free and it is attainable, but it does take practice. May we begin today the practice of being at peace.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, Your word guides us, protects us and relieves us from the stresses that come from living in a fast moving and uncertain world. We can rest in the assurance that You are in control now and always. When we become stressed may we turn our eyes and our heart to you, for You are our Peace. Amen.

Day 12
Ephesians 2:14

This scripture begins with the bold proclamation that Christ is our peace "*For he himself is our peace*" whose blood brought the Gentiles near to God and God's people (2:13).

What does it mean for Christ to be our peace? When we hear this, we may be inclined to think of the inner peace Christ gives. We might recall the encouragement of Philippians 4 to pray with thanksgiving. Then, "*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (4:7).

Yet, however wonderful and true it is that Christ gives us inner peace, this is not the meaning in Ephesians 2:14. When we read this verse in its context, we see that the peace Paul is talking about has to do with ending the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and forging a new relationship of unity in Christ. Christ is our peace in the sense that He and He alone can mend the broken, hostile relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and, by implication, between all enemies.

By saying "*He himself is our peace,*" Paul implies that Christ is not only the source of peace. He is also the one who keeps the peace, so to speak. If we wish to live without conflict among people, if we wish to live fruitful lives in community with others, then we must live in Christ.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus Christ, you are our peace. In you we experience inner peace that exceeds all understanding, but your peace touches more than our soul. You have come to bring peace among people, to erase hostility, to enable human beings to live together with love, justice, and fruitfulness. Thank you for the peace that you alone give. May we live today in your peace, seeking to be a peacemaker in all of our relationships. Bring peace to this broken world, Lord! Amen.



Week 4:

Living in Peace with Others

Day 19

Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

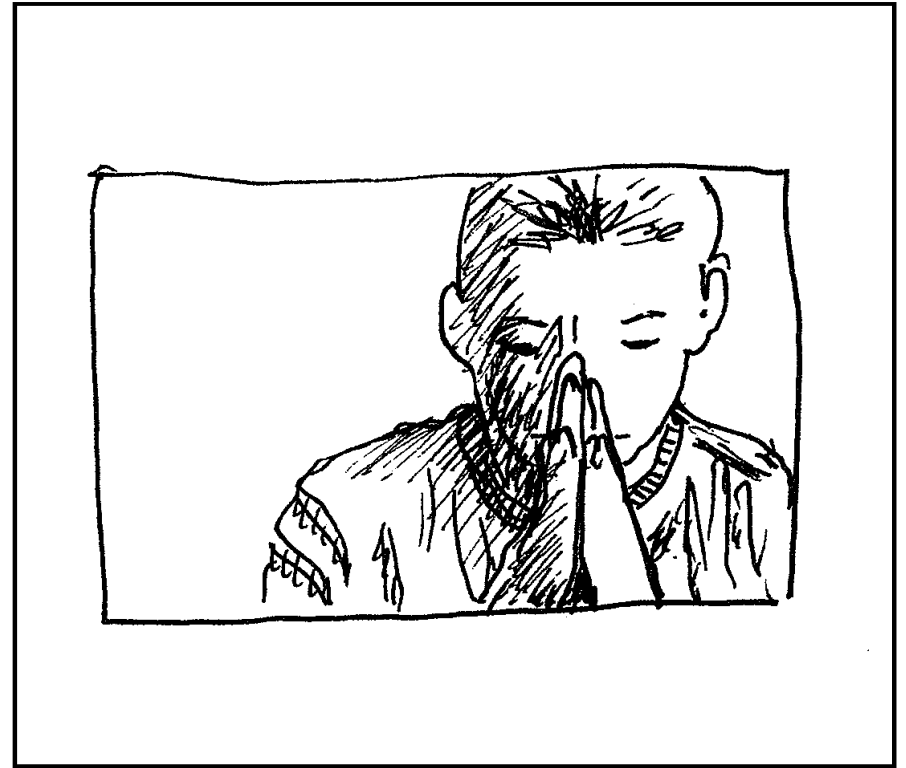
Psalm 34:14

These words are clear and filled with action – “Turn from,” “Do,” “Seek,” “Pursue.” When you read them is there any doubt what your behavior should look like? Certainly sometimes we read Scripture and come away thinking, “Now what in the world did that mean?” But not in this case.

The Psalmist is clear about the path to be taken. It is the path away from evil, the path that will allow us to do good with our lives. It is the path that chases after Biblical peace. It is the path that includes a quest, a striving for wholeness and goodness and an abundantly joyful relationship with God our Creator, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit, our Comforter – none of which can be touched by what is happening around us.

A person standing firm with this kind of peace reigning in her/his heart and mind will not be moved. A community of people standing firm with this kind of peace reigning in their hearts and minds will move mountains.

PRAYER: God who completes us, thank you that we may find our wholeness in you. Grant us now the peace that passes all human understanding. Give us the strength to put aside our own selfish intent, so we may seek peace for our friendship circles, our congregations, and our communities. Allow the peace that rules in our hearts and minds to spill over like showers of blessing on all whom we come in contact with today and in the future. Amen.



Week 3:
Praying for Peace
In the Community

Day 13

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6 NRSV)

As I read Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kingdom, I am reminded of the passage's influence on the artwork of the American folk artist, Edward Hicks (1780 – 1849). As a Quaker minister and pacifist, Hicks was drawn to the vivid imagery of Isaiah's prophecy of peace. Without formal art training, Hicks used the skills he learned as a sign painter to create multiple versions of the biblical scene.

One of his earlier works, *Peaceable Kingdom*, on display at Yale's Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, illustrates the connection that Hicks made between the biblical narrative and the events of his day. On the right hand side of the composition, a young child embraces a lion with an outstretched arm. Slightly behind the lion stands a cow. At the child's feet, a leopard is paired with a goat, and a sheep is paired with a wolf. On the left hand side of the composition, Hicks parallels the literal biblical narrative with a group of Quakers holding a banner inscribed with the words from the Gospel of Luke, "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to men." Linking the Old Testament with the New Testament and applying them both to his context, Hicks understood the role that people play in creating peace. Throughout history, there have been countless peacemakers who, like Hicks, have had a vision for what a peaceable kingdom would look like in their own context. May we also be peace visionaries as we work together to make the peaceable kingdom more of a reality in our present day.

Prayer: O Lord, Prince of Peace, you have taught us to pray: thy kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. May we be instruments of your peace as we strive to make the world more like Heaven. Amen.

Day 18

Matthew 6:12

This is one of the most difficult of Jesus' teachings. It is also the most freeing. This part of the Lord's Prayer admonishes us to forgive as a prerequisite for healthy relationships, both with other humans, as well as with our God. The two are intimately connected. In verse 14 & 15 Jesus tells us that if we do not forgive, then we will not be able to receive God's forgiveness. Ouch!

Forgiveness and being forgiven is at the very heart of a disciple's life - making peace between fellow human beings and enjoying the blessing of Divine Peace.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation though. We forgive those who have sinned against us because it is spiritually healthy for us to do so; the expelling of the poison of anger and hatred we harbor toward one who has caused us harm. And it often is a one sided exchange. Reconciliation on the other hand requires the cooperation of the one who has sinned against you. You cannot be reconciled with someone who still holds open hostility or even just indifference toward you.

The Apostle Paul writes, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Romans 12:18) "So far as it depends on you..." A peaceful disciple is one who can forgive and act peacefully toward others even if those others do not reciprocate. And remember that Paul wrote this at a time when many forces were extremely hostile toward the budding Christian movement.

Prayer: Great Prince of Peace, give us the wisdom, courage and grace to forgive those who have hurt us, and grant us your forgiveness and your gift of peace that is shalom. Amen.

Day 17
Psalm 85:8

Sometimes two persons or even a family who have been together for many years can have whole, full length conversations without remembering a word that was said. Take this for example.

He says, “How was your day dear?”

She says, “Oh it was a busy one. I had a doctor’s appointment this morning. When I finally got out of the doctor’s office I did the grocery shopping. By the way I got some of the fruit that you really like. Then I went to the diner and had a sandwich for lunch.”

He says, “That’s nice.”

Thirty minutes later he says, “Did you eat lunch today?”

She says, “I told you I had a sandwich at the diner. Were you not listening?”

You know how those conversations go. We listen but not enough to remember. Or we think we are listening or we say we are listening but really our mind is racing in fourteen different directions.

In today’s scripture, the Psalmist asks to hear what the Lord is saying. He knows that if he listens, really listens, he will hear God speak peace to His people.

Listening for God to speak to us takes more concentration and discipline than even listening to your family. But if we are able to separate ourselves from the busyness of each day to pray and open our ears to hear God, we may just hear a word of peace which will then allow us to share that peace with others in our community. The Psalmist tells us that if we are faithful to God and if we turn our hearts to God, we will hear this word of peace. May it be so and if it is so, then we can make a difference in our world. This is our prayer.

PRAYER: God of the Psalmist, of the prophets, and of your people. We turn our hearts and souls to you this day and we listen for your word of peace in our heads, in our hearts and in our communities. Amen.

Day 14
1 Timothy 2:1-2

In this passage, Paul urges Timothy to pray on behalf of *everyone* – notably kings and others in positions of authority – that all may lead peaceful and quiet lives in favor with God. If he could speak with us today, no doubt Paul would urge us to continue doing the same.

Though he does not elaborate, Paul’s reference to “everyone” would certainly include members of our families, friends, strangers, and even our enemies. Most of us find it easy to pray for our families and friends. Praying for those who are not as close to us, however, is not necessarily so easy. It requires us to know something about them so that we can pray accordingly, and it requires us to demonstrate interest and compassion as we ask God to touch their hearts so that they, too, may lead “peaceful and quiet lives.” Since peace begins at home and spreads as we share it with those around us, praying for strangers and our enemies can bring us closer to them, putting us in a position where we can share peace with them.

PRAYER: Gracious God, as Paul urged Timothy, we pray on behalf of everyone – our world leaders, our families, our friends, strangers, and our enemies – that all of us may lead peaceful and quiet lives in favor with you. Help each of us be an instrument of your peace, sharing that peace with those around us wherever we may travel. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Day 15
Jeremiah 14:13

A colleague and I sat in a restaurant and after we had finished our meal, the waiter came to us and asked, "Is there anything else you would like?" My friend answered, flippantly, "Yes, world peace." I don't think that his request was on the menu. For my friend, his quip was a way of keeping the hope of peace on his lips and in conversation. For the waiter, this was beyond his scope.

For the prophets of Jeremiah's day, peace was not theirs to give either. They ran around saying that God was going to provide the Children of Israel with peace and squelch the famine that was ravaging their land. But they were not speaking for God, and God let them know it the hard way. The Israelites were not seeking God's peace; they were living apart from God, going their own way. The result was famine and impending military doom.

When we ask for God's peace, we must be prepared to LIVE God's peace. When we cheer the eviction of the homeless from an abandoned building but do not address a lack of affordable housing and mental health care are we ready for God's Peace? When the only jobs for unskilled workers are part time minimum wage service jobs and we complain about 'those people' receiving handouts like Food Stamps are we ready for God's Peace? When we remain silent as some of our neighbors belittle members of minority groups because they talk, dress or worship differently are we ready for God's Peace?

If we can begin to see the world as God does, with no lines mar-
ring a blue-green celestial sphere and inhabited by people and living things, when we treat the planet with the respect it is due and champion the right of all people to have their basic needs met, then we will be able to hear the prophets of peace with hearts attuned to God, and we will find peace.

PRAYER: Open our eyes Dear Lord to the ways that bring your true and good peace. May we live expectantly of that blessing and may we work for it as well. Amen.

Day 16

*When the ways of people please the Lord,
He causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.
Proverbs 16.7*

My friend Jennie used to be a crossing guard at a school in our neighborhood in Bridgeport. One day as she was involved with crossing one group of children, a woman across the street with another group of kids began to cross. Jennie asked her to wait until she could cross them. When she did so the woman began to curse her. She is a good bit taller than Jennie and was looking down at her and yelling in a threatening way. After that at different times this woman would pass by in her car cussing her out. On one occasion she even tried to hit Jennie with her car. Needless to say Jennie was nervous and scared. Her supervisor was so concerned she moved Jennie to a different spot for a week. Jennie asked God to show her how to handle the situation. A group at church also prayed with her about it.

This was happening during the weeks approaching the Christmas holiday. Before the Christmas break Jennie liked to hand out little gifts to the people who were regulars crossing at her corner. As she was doing that she felt that God wanted her to give a gift to this woman who had become her enemy, if she came by that day. And of course her enemy did show up. She was walking down the sidewalk across the street from Jennie. Though she was afraid to do so, Jennie summoned up her courage and called out to her. The woman came over, and Jennie said, "I want to give you this gift." The woman was so amazed by this simple loving gesture that she immediately hugged Jennie and thanked her. From that day forward they were always on friendly terms.

PRAYER: Lord, help me live in a way that pleases you, especially as a peacemaker. Amen.