Text: John 14:27

27 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.

In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Question of the day: How would you define peace … and do so not with words, but with a picture? That was the challenge posed to two artists who were competing for a prize to be awarded to the one whose work best portrayed perfect peace. What would you choose as your subject?

Well, the first artist chose to paint a high mountain lake, its surface so still that it reflected the surrounding trees and mountains like a mirror. No birds flew in the sky. No animal life appeared in his picture. It was simply nature perfectly quiet, perfectly at peace.

The second artist painted a somewhat different scene. His painting featured a roaring waterfall over which a tree stretched out a sturdy branch, and in the branch the artist painted a tiny sparrow sleeping in its nest. In the midst of what seemed like terrible danger, the sparrow was at peace, her nest snugly built on a branch that the roaring waters below could not reach.

Those two paintings illustrate quite well the difference between the world’s definition of peace and the Biblical concept of peace — and there is a significant difference between the two. The world generally understands peace as the absence of all trouble, threats or dangers, like the mountain lake portrayed by the first artist. On the other hand, peace as the Bible speaks of it may be yours even in the midst of troubles, threats or dangers. St. Paul demonstrated this kind of inner peace when he and Silas sang hymns while in jail at Philippi. While the Jewish leaders screamed for Jesus’ to be crucified, Jesus demonstrated a calmness that impressed the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. It is this peace, which was His own shield and helmet when under attack, that Jesus wants to give to us — but “not,” He says, “as the world gives do I give to you” (vs.27). In other words, His peace isn’t like anything this world has to offer us. It’s quite different, and far superior.

We live in a world that is anything but peaceful. Historians have documented nearly 15,000 wars in just the last 2,000 years. So much for world peace. In many homes it is no better. Fighting words are regularly dropped like bombs, turning those homes into war zones rather than sanctuaries of peace. Children tear viciously at each other, often in imitation of their parents. And, you know, if the unbelieving, the unsaved realized the destiny waiting for them without Christ, whatever earthly peace they have now would evaporate instantly.

The absence of peace in the world and in our personal lives is another casualty of the fall into sin. When the war between God and Satan that began in heaven spilled over into this world, and Adam and Eve joined in rebelling against God, they destroyed the perfect peace they knew in Eden. And we, their descendants, were born as rebels, not as children of God. Colossians 1:21 describes our state in these words: “you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Because
of sin there is no peace in this world. Because of sin we live in fear.

The night that Jesus spoke the words in our text He had to tell His disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (vs. 27). Not be afraid? They were in Jerusalem and they didn’t want to be there. They knew the Jewish leaders were plotting to kill Jesus, and maybe His followers too! Not be afraid? In a few hours Jesus would be arrested, nailed to a cross and their worst fear would be realized. How could they not be afraid?

Nothing robs us of peace like fear. Think about the fears that destroy your sense of peace. It’s not hard; they come easily to mind. Perhaps you are afraid of illness with no insurance to cover the cost? Afraid of growing old and helpless? Maybe you are afraid for a loved one, fearful of a home invasion or an attack on one of your children? You might be afraid that the water you are drinking is contaminated with lead, or you will contact a life-threatening virus. Perhaps you are afraid you will be the one let go at work or afraid that you may lose your home, or that the market might collapse and your retirement will be unable to support your lifestyle. Some fears are even more personal: that your children won't love you; or that mom and dad love your brother or sister more than you. Are you young folks afraid of other kids at school? Are you afraid somebody is going to beat you out for a place on the team or that you will never be able to pay back those student loans you are taking out for your education? Are you afraid someone might find out about your past, of things you did of which you are now ashamed? I can't begin to list all of the fears we have, but I know that we have them, we all do, and those fears rob us of the peace Jesus wants us to have.

So what are you going to do with those fears? Can you take care of them yourself, overcome them? Maybe you've tried, even been to counselors for some professional help. But the fears still come, ever changing as you age. What are you going to do?

The disciples to whom Jesus spoke were afraid. In fear they ran away when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. After Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, they went into hiding, locking the doors in fear. When they first heard of Jesus' empty tomb, they were confused, but when they saw a risen Lord, one who could conquer sin, death and Satan, they were changed. They knew that if Jesus could conquer death, they had nothing to fear. It was a wonderful, transforming moment. No longer did they cower in fear. No longer were they afraid of Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders or Pontius Pilate and his Roman soldiers. The disciples became lions for the Lord, roaring out to all who would listen: “Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, has put an end to all our fears. Jesus can do the same for you.”

At the close of a sermon, pastors often quote Philippians chapter 4, verse 7. I’m sure you recognize these words: “May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” What you may not know is that the word keep — as in “keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” — is actually a military expression that means “to post a guard against the attack of an enemy.” When God’s peace is on guard, the Christian is in a fortress where nothing can harm him. Christ Jesus is Himself this fortress, and the peace of God stands guard and thus keeps worry and fear at bay and unholy and unnerving thoughts from attacking our minds. The result is peace, even when surrounded by trouble.

Isn’t this the kind of peace we want? We want a peace that deals with the past, one which can free us from the torturous memory of past sins. In Jesus we have that peace. The Colossians passage I quoted earlier continues, “You were alienated from God ... But now He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free
In simpler words, Paul told the Romans, “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ro.5:1) The sins of your past are gone, washed away in the blood of Jesus. That is the most blessed peace which Christ brings to us.

But we want a peace that also governs the present and doesn’t allow the uncertainties of the future to frighten us. Is it not true that often our anxieties and fears come because we borrow trouble or we project the worst, and so we become afraid of what might happen? I think it’s significant that Jesus says at the end of this discussion with His disciples, “I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn.16:33). The One in whom we are to put our trust is greater than any power in this world, able to overcome everything we may fear.

So let’s get very practical and ask, “How do we lay hold of and implement the peace Jesus wants us to have?”

This past week my friend and fishing partner underwent open heart surgery. Prior to his operation, the physical therapist told him about all that would happen during and after his surgery. Then he said to my friend, Don, “It sounds like a lot, but it sure beats the alternative…” to which Don replied, “No it doesn’t.” Thinking Don misheard, the PT repeated, “No, I said, ‘It sure beats the alternative.’” Don said again, “No it doesn’t, because the alternative for me is being in heaven with my Savior Jesus Christ!” The PT thought about that for a moment, then he commented, “Your faith means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” To which Don replied, “It sure does!” He was at perfect peace going into life or death surgery because he had appropriated by faith that peace our Savior alone can give.

That is exactly what our Lord wants us all to do, to trust Him who is greater than the sum of all our fears. He wants us to believe the promises He has given us. This is why Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, to call us to faith, to change our perspective, to make us unafraid. It is why the Bible calls Him “the Prince of peace” (Is.9:6).

When we use this peace Christ gives, we will also find it a great help when it comes to knowing God’s will for us. For example, do you have a problem to solve, a decision to make? Colossians 3:15 directs, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The word “rule” comes from the Greek word meaning “to umpire.” Let Christ’s peace be the umpire that makes the calls. It works like this: If you are thinking of doing something, and God’s Word doesn’t forbid it, and you can do what you plan and still keep that peace Christ gives, then do it with confidence. But if, on the other hand, what you are planning robs your mind of that peace and you find yourself worrying, becoming afraid, then, even if it seems logical, don’t do it. Let Christ’s peace be the umpire, the decider.

Finally, I leave you with this thought: The prophet Isaiah wrote, “You (i.e. God) will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is fixed on You” (Is. 26:3). Thousands of Christians will testify that there is more positive psychology in those few words than in a whole library of self-help books. God’s peace comes to those who stop in the storms of life and take time to seek Him. Contrarily, we lack peace when we do not take the time to fix our hearts on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ peace comes through daily devotion and through hearing His Word. Jesus’ peace calms troubled hearts and makes fearful hearts confident. His peace sustains us in every circumstance of our lives. His peace keeps us at one with God. We need not be afraid or overcome by our troubled hearts. We have peace through Jesus.
So, what a fitting close those words of St. Paul are: “May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Ph.4:7)

Amen.