

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Third Race”

Rev. Ben Garris

December 22, 2024

This morning you'll notice I'm not Jay Howell. We invited the Howell's to Salem's 5th birthday party yesterday at the Tennessee Elite Gymnastics Gym, and Pastor Jay being the fun kid at heart that he is, was jumping on those trampolines. Low and behold he was jumping really high, and he landed wrong and hurt his ankle. He wanted me to pass along the message to any Men over 40, that maybe trampolines should be avoided. So, we're doing a Pastoral pivot this morning. I'm going to share about a common advent theme we've heard much about and will continue hearing this December: that is the topic of Peace.

Let me hear you, how do you define peace? What does peace mean or look like to you? Some of you are thinking of tie-die, headbands, and a drug induced euphoria. For those of us who grew up in church there is a chance that the topic of peace seems lackluster or perhaps elementary. Google defines peace in the noun as “freedom from disturbance, tranquility, a state in which there is no war.” In the exclamation, “peace” is either an informal greeting (peace be with you) or a command for silence, aka ZIP IT! In the verb it can mean leaving...we've heard the phrase “peace out.”

I want to share what peace means in the biblical sense. I found a great clip by the Bible Project that truly does a great job explaining the biblical understanding of peace. Peace is more than just the absence of conflict and the waving of a white flag; it is the greater presence of wholeness and completeness in its place. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for peace is “shalom” and in the New Testament the Greek word for peace is “eirene.” The most basic meaning of the word means complete or whole, but it can also refer to a person's wellbeing. How is your wellbeing? How is your shalom? Is it out of alignment? Is it cracked? If so, it needs to be restored, and that is what the verb shalom means, to make complete, to restore. So, to reconcile a broken relationship means to bring shalom, or when two rival nations make shalom it doesn't just mean that they stop fighting, but moreover they start working together for each other's benefit.

Peace, Eirene, Shalom.

In Isaiah 9:5-7 we read: ***For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Great will be his authority, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.***

Here we have a picture of the boots and uniforms of battle being thrown into the fire and the proclamation of a child to be born of kingly lineage from the line of David. This child will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. He is the embodiment of shalom. Isaiah tells that of the **greatness/increase/abundance** of his government and peace [shalom] there will be no end. Furthermore, it is the zeal of the Lord that accomplishes this. Do you know what zeal is? Zeal is a biblical word meaning intense passion

compelling to action. What force compels you to action, I wonder? The Lord God himself is passionate about His people and passionate about bringing His peace, His shalom, His eirene on the earth once again.

Similarly, the prophet Micah shares familiar verses that we hear often quoted from Matthew 2 this time of year concerning the small town of Bethlehem. “Out of you will come one who will be ruler over Israel.” This one will reunite the brothers/clans of Israel once more and will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.

Throughout this sermon series we’ve been tracking the split of the nation of Israel into two factions: Israel in the North, and Judah in the South, but Micah says that this child will shepherd them together once again and unite the flock that is the people of God. Micah concludes in 5:5 with, “and he will be their peace.” It is this idea that the Apostle Paul expounds upon in Ephesians 2:11-13 ¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ...

In the Bible, from a Jewish perspective, you had 2 races to classify people: Jews who shared the heritage of the nation of Israel, and then everyone else commonly referred to as Gentiles (Literally meaning “nations”). Paul is writing to an audience of Gentile Christians. Gentiles were formerly excluded from Israel. They were alienated from the covenant of God, God’s promises, and God himself. How would you like it to hear you are cut off from the Living God? The animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles was such that many Jews (not all of them) believed the Gentiles were created just to fuel the fires of hell. They had a saying, “The best of the serpents crush . . . the best of the Gentiles kill.” In Jewish parlance Gentiles were considered dogs. Do you recall Jesus saying, in Matthew 15:26 to the Canaanite woman who was asking for healing for her daughter, “It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs,”? Furthermore, it was unlawful to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth because to do so would be to bring another unbeliever into the world. Moreover, the temple had a wall that kept the Gentiles separate from the Jews with inscriptions on it in both Latin and Greek, “No foreigner (Gentile) may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” It’s no wonder that the Gentiles in return held such strong antisemitism (A big word for the hatred of Jews). Oil and water mixed better than Jew and Gentile. Have you ever felt so strongly about another person, race, group, or nation?

But now the Gentiles have been brought near by the blood of Christ, [read v.14] for he himself is our peace [shalom]. It is emphatic, he himself, Jesus. Is. Our. Shalom! How does he accomplish this? [v.14b-15a] “He has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.” Do you think that when Paul refers to the “dividing wall of hostility” that the Gentiles in Ephesus would not have been keenly aware of what that means? Christ fulfilled all moral law and revealed the meaning behind ritual law, such as circumcision (to put off the flesh and focus on the spirit), so that **all may have access to God**. Jesus said in John 10:16, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” Therefore, what was Jesus’ purpose? (v.15) “His purpose was to **create in himself one new humanity** out of the two, thus making peace” (shalom/eirene). REMEMBER historically, people were understood to be one of two races: Jew or Gentile. Here, Paul says that the very purpose of Jesus is to create a whole new race altogether, a third race! This was how early Christians in the 1st century would refer to themselves at times.

Jesus does not simply relabel Jews as Christian Jews, or Gentiles as Christian Gentiles, but creates a whole new identity bound together in him, whole and complete. Say together, **“we are the Third Race.”** This third race, this new identity, this new way of being is marked and characterized by shalom. [Read v.16-18] ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile **both of them to God** through the cross, by which he **put to death their hostility.** ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him **we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**

The result is the church of Jesus: [19-22]. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” [This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God].

This is Shalom. This is Eirene. This. Is. Peace.

On April 9, 1865 Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse thus ending the civil war, but did it bring shalom? On April 30, 1975 the fall of Saigon ended the Vietnam War/Conflict, but did it bring shalom? Nov. 9, 1989 the Berlin Wall came down, but did it bring Shalom? These and many other versions of “peace” have occurred all throughout human history, and yet where is the peace? JESUS HIMSELF IS OUR SHALOM. **Any version of peace that does not begin with the peace of Jesus is no peace at all.** It is not enough to wave a white flag and cease fighting. It is not enough to eliminate hostilities and dividing walls and bringing people together. Peace, eirene, shalom is about a whole new race and identity established under the Prince of Peace alone. **You:** How is your shalom? How is your peace? How is your well-being? Are you whole? Are you complete or are you still in distress and brokenness? Spiritually, are you still at war with God? Paul says in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” **Know that the Lord God is passionate to give you His peace that surpasses all understanding if only you come to the point of surrender and trust that He is enough for you and your soul.**

Many of you have shalom with God, you trust in Jesus and follow him, yet you lack shalom with your neighbor, your family, your co-worker, your boss, or whomever it is even though you are a believer. You must stop looking at one another as different/as other than you; you are one in Christ. You are the Third Race both with access to the Father through the Spirit. As a Christian, our role is to restore and maintain peace with every soul we come into contact with because we have been given the Peace of God, and it is up to us to make peace with everyone. It’s not easy to love your neighbor. In closing, may you, the Third Race, be marked by shalom. May you have a placableness about you for Jesus is your peace. May you retaliate good for evil, may you have within yourself a readiness to be reconciled, may you have a sober use of all that God has given you to enjoy: food and drink, work and play, and may you honor God with your bodies and the attitudes of your hearts. May you be charitable and loving to one another, bearing patiently under the hand of God that you may forgive and be forgiven of your injuries.

May you love God and love neighbor in such a way that more and more and more and more of the human race would be counted among the Third Race. **In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Shalom.**