**Peace in a Time of Panic**

Based on [Zechariah 9:9-12](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Zec9.9-12)

Preached on April 1, 2020

Lenten Midweek 5

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Zechariah preached that the Christ would come and speak peace to the nations. Isaiah calls him the prince of peace. The angel who appeared to the shepherds sang that on account of His birth, there is peace on earth. This peace is a peace of heart and mind, a peace of conscience. In many ways, it is a peace in knowing that *there is no emergency in which your salvation can be threatened so long as you have the bare essentials...God’s word and faith.* Everything else that God gives us is a luxury.

A famous example of Jesus proclaiming such peace is in the company of the pharisees who denied that there was any physical emergency that would allow one to give assistance to someone on the sabbath. “Which of you having an ox or a donkey that falls into a well on the Sabbath will not pull him out.” Jesus reminds those present that the Sabbath was made for Man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Sabbath is intended to be man’s gift, not his sacrifice to God.

Extend that to today. How many of you, who on Sunday morning get a phone call that a friend needs to be taken to the hospital, will not miss church to help? I have no doubt you would not feel guilty about it or repent of it, because you have done nothing wrong, but rather committed an act of mercy. That is the peace we have because of Jesus. He paid for our sin, so we are no longer under the guardianship of the law, but are free, in the Spirit, to do what is best for our neighbor, always, but especially when his physical or eternal life is in peril.

Because we have heard such a great message of peace from Christ, we can ask ourselves in the present crisis, “What is best for our neighbor?” During a pandemic, the best way to help and support your neighbor in physical need is to not contribute to its spread. We are to remember the sabbath day by not neglecting or despising the Word of God and the congregation of the saints. But if our sabbath day observance makes us neglect a real emergency that puts our neighbor in danger, then we have misunderstood the gospel. The Divine Service was made for man, not man for the Divine Service.

The Divine Service of Word and Sacrament ministry in the church is a gift, and we ought to treasure it and not take it for granted. But we also must not be selfish to insist on getting some good thing at the expense of our neighbor. We don’t want to horde the physical gifts of God and thus deprive our neighbor. Neither to we hoard the spiritual gifts at the expense of others. We are told by the government that this present virus is a physical emergency--and life threatening to a particularly vulnerable demographic of elderly people. It is not an emergency simply because ***your*** health is in danger if ***you*** get it, but also because you then become contagious to others as well. If you are careless, you could spread it to others before you even know you’re a threat. This seem to be a clear issue, it’s not a matter of personally choosing to accept risk for yourself, but whether or not to risk the health of your neighbor.

I bring up this topic because most places are mandating the temporary ceasing of non-essential services; and so many businesses are fighting to be considered “essential”. On this account, many faithful pastors have been inclined to argue that weekly corporate worship is an “essential” business. And I get why they do so. What does it communicate to concede that weekly corporate worship is “non-essential”? Does that mean that weekly corporate worship isn’t essential to the faith of a christian? Does that mean that the a liquor store is more *essential* to society than a Church? No way!!!

I for one am sympathetic to this argument. My initial reaction is to insist that weekly worship is essential. But on further reflection I think the better view of it is this: First, the church shouldn’t take it personally that a liquor store gets “essential service” status and we don’t. People don’t go to the liquor store to “gather.” Second, I am inclined to flip the script on this issue. Let us freely admit that gathering together every Sunday is a **luxury**, not a necessity. The weekly use of the Lord’s Supper, a luxury. Hearing the word preached and the absolution spoken by a called and ordained minister, also a luxury. By a “luxury,” I mean first something that is desirable, but *to be deprived of it, especially if for only a short time, does not constitute an emergency to one’s physical or spiritual survival*. If someone’s ox falls into a well, that’s a physical emergency. If someone has a heart attack on the way to church, that’s a physical emergency. Also, if there was someone about to die and they hadn’t received baptism, that’s a spiritual emergency. If there is someone who is on their deathbed and is doubting their salvation, that’s also a spiritual emergency. When life or eternal life is in immediate peril, that is how we should understand “essential services” here.

We do not go to church weekly, or gather together for service, because our eternal life is inevitably in immediate peril by the time sunday morning comes around. Make no mistake, you should come to church every week, reflecting upon the weight of your sin and the need for Jesus to forgive. But we do not believe that a missed opportunity to do this means you are “testing God” or “neglecting your salvation.” If it was, then it would be hard to see Jesus as the one who proclaims peace. But because he made atonement once for all and declared, “It is finished”, we who believe this have peace even in a panicked world, and we have a salvation that is secure, even if necessity requires us to miss church.

Someone will say, “But what about those who congregate every week only because they think it is necessary? If you tell them it’s a luxury, then they are going to neglect the church.” Maybe so, but for a true believer all this information would do is release them from the slavery of the law, so they can worship with a willing spirit. But suppose they would then conclude “I don’t need to go to church to be saved.” They are right, because we who have not been going to church for weeks have not lost our salvation. But if they only gather under compulsion to begin with, they are to be pitied. Faithful christians *want* to gather together with other christians who share the same teaching; they *want* to hear what their pastor has to say about the lesson. Faithful Christians want to receive Christ’s body and blood often. Faith can be and has been created and even sustained without these things, it’s true. But faith wants them and prefers to have them because they carry such great promises and blessing from the Lord. And even if the christian doesn’t feel like going to church--because they are tired, or shy, or have other pressing business on their mind--they know that God wants them there and wants to bless them there.

This is the other aspect of calling this a luxury. It is something desirable. So, by saying these things are a luxury is not to say that these things aren’t important. On the contrary; people seem to find flushable toilet paper very important in the present, but it is, after all, a luxury. People survived without it for the first 5,800 years of bowel movements. Or a less crude example: water is all you need to stay hydrated, but God also gives wine to make merry the hearts of men. But we can survive without merry hearts, we cannot survive without water. Perhaps that’s why he made baptism, which is an emergency sacrament, given through water...the Lord’s Supper which is not an emergency sacrament...through wine. And because he is concerned that some luxuries are important...he once turned water into wine.

I pray that the present necessary fast from congregational worship will help you all the more understand the luxurious grace God has ordained to bestow upon us. All we need is simple faith in his word, but he showers us with a pallate of the preached word and sacraments to receive it so that our cup overflows in the fellowship of the saints.