

Christ is our Peace

Holy God, we listen for Your Word, eager for the peace that comes only from You. Open our minds and teach our spirits, that we may rejoice in Your boundless grace. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Summer can be a wonderful time for hiking through woodlands. Being in the forest is a transcendent experience on a warm summer day. Sunshine filters down through green leaves, the trunks of white birches gleam among maples and beeches; fragrant pine needles crunch underfoot. In the woods on a summer day, you move through a landscape alive with color and light and birdsong. Your path may wind through acres of butternut and oak, past thickets of mountain laurel, up a rocky incline to an unexpected vista where the air shimmers. You are where you need to be. Your vision is amplified: the trees and mountains in the distance are just as clear and beautiful as the flowering dogwood right next to you.

The spiritual life can be like that.

You may know joy and quiet beauty in prayer.

Scripture may unfold before you in delightful ways, new light breaking forth from
the old familiar stories.

Worship can surround you with luminous perceptions of the living God.

Just like walking in the woods on a sunny day. A glorious adventure!

But have you ever been *lost* in the woods? Ever hiked past a blaze on a tree without seeing it, pressed on, and then looked up and realized there's no path anywhere around you? I've gotten lost more times than I can count. I've gotten lost all over Connecticut, in Boston and Philadelphia, and abroad in Marburg and Canterbury and Jerusalem. Once I got lost while on an Anglican retreat in the Alsace. My companion assured me that the retreat center was "just over there" and we should take a shortcut through the woods. Really? Really, Andrew, *was* it "just over there"? Because it took us 45 minutes of crashing around in heavy brush before we glimpsed the back of the building and stumbled in late for worship. I've gotten lost multiple times inside huge conference centers. I've gotten lost driving to places I know well. I've gotten lost when walking a short nature trail with a trail map right in my hand.

The spiritual life can be like *that*, too. In your family, work, or community, you think you know where and who you are—then all of a sudden, you don't. Familiar terrain seems strange. Change feels threatening; old landmarks aren't helpful. Sometimes we feel like "sheep without a shepherd"¹—confused, undefended, scared, lost.

That, too, is the spiritual life.

Sometimes it's wonderful, and sometimes it's hard.

The good news is, the Holy Spirit can work with *all of it*.

This morning, I want to lift up two important authorities that can guide you in your spiritual walk. Those two authorities are Bear Grylls and Scripture.

Yes, that's right: the Bible, and British adventurer and survival expert Bear Grylls, host of the TV show "Man vs. Wild." We'll start with Bear Grylls. His credentials are impeccable: he served with the British special forces, summited Mount Everest at age 23, and circumnavigated the British Isles on jet skis. He's done paragliding in the Himalayan mountains and led a team in an ice-breaking inflatable boat some 2,500 miles, through the Arctic Ocean.

The man knows adventure. And he knows risk.

So: Bear Grylls says when you're lost in the wild and have no idea how to

find your way home, listen for water. *Listen for water.*

You need water for hydration, for cleaning food, and for cooking. Water is vital—to survive, you *have* to find it. Bear says: climb as high as you can to look for a river or stream, or even a row of treetops where it looks like the trees might be lined up along water. Once you've gotten your bearings, climb down and make your way toward the water. You won't be able to see it necessarily. Even a stream just a few dozen yards away can be hidden by underbrush. But you can *listen* for the sounds of water flowing along, splashing against rocks and fallen limbs. Tune your senses to *listen* for the sound of water and follow what you hear. Once you find water, you can stay hydrated, you can wash, you can boil water to cook things. If you have water, you'll make it. Water will sustain your body and quiet your spirit. Then follow the river. Its path is the path toward home.

Bear Grylls knows his stuff.

If you're lost in an actual forest, you need water.

If you're lost in a *spiritual* forest—you know what I'm going to say—

you need Scripture.

When you're uncertain of the way forward, when you're afraid, or conflicted, or infuriated at the slow pace of change in this world: consider one of the most powerful and theologically profound texts in the Bible: the Letter to the Ephesians! Now, you know I love the Gospels. The rich traditions of Matthew, the urgent drama of Mark, the nuanced theology of Luke, the mystery of John—you could dive in and spend a lifetime in joyful prayer with any one of those Gospels. But Ephesians too is remarkable. Whether you need to find your way through a really dark forest or just untangle yourself from a maddening thicket, Ephesians is an excellent guide.

Ephesians is like a stream bubbling up from a deep spring, splashing over smooth rocks, and flowing toward home. In whatever forest you find yourself, Ephesians can help. When we're confronted with the world's unrelenting violence and attempts to silence prophetic witness—like last week in the story of Herod beheading John the Baptist—**Ephesians 1** reminds us that we have been chosen in love and blessed with God's glorious grace in Christ, so we can learn—spiritually learn—how to live every moment for the praise of God's glory. Ephesians 1 assures us that the grace of God in Christ is *unstoppable* as the Holy Spirit works through us and in us to transform the Church and the world.

This morning, **Ephesians 2** helps us remember² that we've ALL been lost. Long ago, we Gentiles had been without Christ—strangers to the covenantal promises that had Israel singing and dancing for joy. We were disconnected, “having no hope and without God in the world.” Utterly lost. But God has built all of us together into one community—helped us, through grace, to find our way to Christ and to one another. Now, we can still feel lost sometimes. Maybe there's conflict at work, or your family has financial challenges, or someone you love needs to get free of addiction. Maybe you're paralyzed by what's happening politically in this country. Maybe illness or grief is wrapped around you like a blanket you can't shrug off.

Whatever it is: open the Letter to the Ephesians and *listen for water*.

Whatever thicket has trapped you,
whatever shadows are making it hard to see the path,
keep Ephesians open in front of you and *listen for water*.

Ephesians 2 tells us God is rich in mercy. God has given us what we need to overcome conflict and anxiety, for Christ is our peace. No hierarchy can harm us. No hostility can thwart us.³ We are built up together, and together we have peace—*peace like a river*⁴ in Jesus Christ!

Like a river wearing a new path inexorably through rock,
the peace of Christ can change the world—

one heart at a time, one political mess at a time, one unjust structure at a time.⁵

And so I thank God we've found our way here—to each other and to this altar.⁶

Maybe you glimpsed a beautiful path and it brought you straight here. Maybe you stumbled here seemingly by chance and you're feeling pretty tentative. Maybe you still feel lost and have no idea why you're here. That's fine.

You're here and I'm here, and the angels are rejoicing.

Because together⁷ we are the Body of Christ.

Together we can make our way to this altar:

joyous and anxious,

strong and wounded and fragile,

each one of us found by grace over and over and over again,

as many times as it takes.

Together we can face our challenges, going back out into the world to bear witness—to help others *listen for water*. Together we can move forward toward *peace like a river*, and life more abundant than we could possibly imagine.⁸

In the Name of the One who is our peace and the Fount of every blessing:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

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Proper 11B

2 Sam 7:1-14a; Ps 89:20-37; Eph 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ From our Gospel lesson this morning: Jesus “saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). The rest of this sermon is a meditation on how Ephesians can help us to find our Shepherd.

² To remember this is to know God's saving work deeply, in the history of ancient Israel and in the gracious invitation extended through Christ to those beyond Israel. Further, it is to respond to that invitation. On the imperative to remember in Eph 2:11, Markus Barth comments, “Repentance, decision, and gratitude are called for, not a mental recollection only.” See Barth, *Ephesians 1–3* (Anchor Bible 34; New York: Doubleday, 1967), 147 and 254.

³ Scholars debate the nature of the unity and relationship of Jews and Gentiles as envisioned in Ephesians 2. Harold W. Hoehner writes, “Although Jews and Gentiles had nothing to do with each other before Calvary, both Jews and Gentiles who are in Christ have been united by the blood of Christ. Thus, it is not Jews and Gentiles per se that have been united but Jews and Gentiles in Christ that have been united by the work of Christ” (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 351-52). See further the extended discussion of Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Sacra Pagina 17; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 251-57.

⁴ Isa 66:12; the word translated “prosperity” in the NRSV is *shalom* in the Hebrew: peace, well-being, safety, prosperity. For more on “peace like a river” in Christian tradition, listen to the hymn, “It is Well with My Soul,” perhaps in this arrangement by [BYU Vocal Point](#) or by a solo performer, G. Michael Eldridge, singing all four parts as [Acapeldridge](#). See also Phil 4:7 for the peace of God surpassing understanding.

⁵ As Markus Barth rightly says, “the peace [Christ] brings is a social and political event” (*Ephesians 1–3*, 262).

⁶ I emphasize the altar as a way of attending to the focus on worship in our Ephesians lesson. Many scholars have argued that we should hear traces of an ancient hymn in 2:14-18, not unlike ancient hymns proposed to underlie Col 1:15-20 and Phil 2:5-11. Markus Barth writes, “Verses 13 and 18 are not the only ones that contain terms denoting liturgical assembly. The centerpiece of the whole section, i.e. vss. 14-17, attributes the making of peace to an act of worship: Jesus Christ is high priest and victim at the same time, who by his intercession has joined Jews and Gentiles together in order to plead for them” (*Ephesians 1–3*, 312).

⁷ Hoehner says about Ephesians, “the dominant theme of this epistle is love” (*Ephesians*, 351). My emphasis on “together” reads the theological valuation of unity in Ephesians not as pressure toward doctrinal conformity with its suppression of dissenting witnesses, but as *mutual solidarity in love*—as a community continually formed and reformed in love through Christ. Markus Barth finds important the issue of whether θεμέλιος in 2:20 should be translated “cornerstone,” a stone in the foundation, or “keystone,” a stone at the top of an arch. He considers the implications of both possibilities for ecclesiology: the Church is grounded in God’s saving work in the past and being built up toward the eschatological future as well (*Ephesians 1–3*, 314-319). He concludes of the understanding of church in Ephesians 2, “This community has to develop externally and internally and be perpetually reformed in order to grow.... Eph 2:21 can be considered a scriptural ground for the adage, *ecclesia semper reformanda*” (323).

⁸ In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”