

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 6, 2025

Begin with Peace

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Take no purse, no bag, no sandals, don't even take a greeting for your fellow travelers! No...the only thing Christ bids his "sent-ones" take with them is PEACE. And not the peace we humans typically think of. No, Jesus bids his followers take the peace of God, the peace which surpasses all our human understanding. The peace that the world cannot give...that peace.

This is an important distinction too. Human peace really doesn't compare in any way shape or form to the peace of God. So let's examine human peace, and let's start with the peace that Jesus was born into, lived under, and eventually executed by...the *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome.

Some 30 years before the start of the Common Era, Octavian (later Augustus) defeats Mark Antony and Cleopatra¹ and becomes uncontested Emperor of the Roman Empire. To head off potential future challengers, he creates a military junta composed of the most powerful and influential military leaders of his time. Once all threats to his rule were accounted for, Augustus closed the Gates of Janus (signifying that Rome was officially at peace).

You will note that this peace is not an absence of violence or oppression. Nor is it the peace that, as Martin Luther King Junior so eloquently put, includes the requisite presence of justice. No, the *Pax Romana* means one thing and

¹ The Battle of Actium occurred in 31BCE.

one thing alone: there is peace in the Roman Empire because there exists no other power on earth capable of threatening it. It is peace at the end of a gladius.

From contemporary records we know that during the 200 years of the *Pax Romana*, the emperors generally kept on hand 100,000+ legionnaires. Political and religious oppression during this time (the *Pax Romana* is considered to have spanned from 30BCE-180CE) was extensive and mass executions were common, especially in the periphery of the Empire. *Pax Romana* is the sort of human peace the prophet Jeremiah spoke of: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”²

The historian Tacitus (~55CE) gives us a glimpse of what it was like to live under the “peace” of Rome: “[We] have sought in vain to escape [the Romans’] oppression by obedience and submissiveness. [They are] plunderers of the world...If the enemy is rich, they are rapacious, if poor, they lust for dominion. Not East, not West has satiated them...They rob, butcher, plunder, and call it ‘empire’; and where they make a desolation, they call it ‘peace.’”³

An account from the Jewish historian Josephus reports that around the time Jesus was born the Roman military crucified some two thousand people in the Galilean city of Sepphoris as punishment for rebelling against Roman rule.⁴ This bustling city was a half day’s walk from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. The “peace” of Rome that Jesus was born into involved the mass execution...the mass lynching, of his neighbors. It meant brutal taxation and exploitation, as well as the ever-present threat of violence by looming Roman soldiers. The *Pax Romana* was enforced through propaganda, terror

² Jeremiah 6:14 (NRSVUE)

³ Tacitus, *Agricola* 29-32. Tacitus: Calgacus' Speech to his Troops (85CE)

⁴ Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews* 17:295

campaigns, mass lynchings, and systemic inequality and injustice. Though to be fair, the Pax Romana was great if you were a wealthy citizen of Rome!

Jesus sends the seventy out into the reality of *Pax Romana* and the only thing...the ONLY THING he bids them carry as they go is peace. Real peace. Shalom peace. The sort of peace that includes justice. The sort of peace that recognizes the humanity and autonomy of all people. The sort of peace that seeks wholeness and reconciliation. The sort of peace that facilitates healing and growth. When you get right down to it, it seems to be the only thing really worth carrying.

Community and connection certainly cannot exist without peace. Wholeness and justice would be next to impossible without it too. No wonder Jesus instructs the “sent-ones,” the first apostles, to begin their every encounter with a new community by invoking peace. And the peace they are invoking! Wow! Those who experienced it must have been caught off guard!

Imagine living most of your life as a subsistence farmer, barely eking out enough food for you and your family, and only hearing someone greet you in “peace” when they’re coming to occupy you, or tax you, or conscript you into labor for the military. Then along comes yet another stranger proclaiming: “Peace!” But this peace is rather different. The peace this new one is proclaiming is a peace predicated on justice and wholeness.

This apostle speaks of peace as a way of life, a way of connection and communion. This peace doesn’t demand anything of you, though it does invite you to respond to it, replicate it, reciprocate it. It is the peace of a shared meal. It is the peace of working together towards a common purpose. It is the peace that descends after the chaos of a birth. It is the peace of shared grief. It is the peace of God and it is *shalom*.

Shalom which so defies translation and definition. Shalom which means reconciliation with God.⁵ Shalom which means the end of hostilities and war.⁶ Shalom which means an end to oppression and greed.⁷ Shalom which means personal tranquility.⁸ Shalom which seems to be the state of the world when the Kingdom and the Kin-dom, of God is ascendent. No wonder it's all we need carry with us. Amen.

⁵ *c.f.* Psalm 85:8, Jeremiah 16:5, Numbers 25:12

⁶ *c.f.* Deuteronomy 20:12; Judges 21:13, 1 Kings 5:12

⁷ *c.f.* Jeremiah 6:1-9, 14

⁸ *c.f.* Psalm 4:8, Isaiah 26:3, 32:17