

"PEACE . . ."

...we say to others in the pew, alongside, in front, in back. "Peace," we say, and if you are my age perhaps you think of Woodstock, middle-class American kids costumed in cast-off clothing singing antiwar ballads. If you are older perhaps you think of Normandy and Tom Brokaw's "greatest generation." If you are any age these days you think of Iraq. In this world what does it mean for the assembly to say "Peace."

In Judges 6:11-24 there is the story of Gideon's call. The Israelite tribes are being harassed by the Midianite tribes, and Israel's young life is threatened. The angel of the Lord appears to Gideon, calling him to lead the Israelite tribes to victory. Gideon, aware of his own weakness and the people's vulnerability, seeks assurance. Employing an ancient religious ritual, he sets out sacrificial foods - meat, matzos, broth - and the angel, miraculously evoking fire from the rock, consumes the food. Now believing that the messenger has come from the Lord, Gideon accepts the commission, but he fears this God more than he fears the Midianites. In a surprising turn of the story, the Lord says to Gideon, "Peace be to you." Gideon erects an altar there and calls the shrine "The Lord is peace."

Martin Luther would call this narrative "gospel." The people are suffering under social disorientation and military oppression; they are gearing up to intensify the warfare; Israelite identity in the Promised Land may never be realized; even Gideon's own father worships the Canaanite deities. But into this human mess comes an angel of God with the good news that the Lord is peace and will bring peace: peace for the Israelite tribes, peace between Gideon and his father, peace between terrified humankind and the mighty God. The Lord brings peace.

Today, in our world and in our liturgy for the life of the world, we are reminded that the greeting of Peace is a gift to an amazingly broad, plural "you." Decades of Victorian manners may suggest that "peace" is about my inner contentment, about patience and resignation, about subdued conversation rather than boisterous argumentation. But the peace of the Lord is other than a preference for mellow personalities.

Peace comes in the assembly when Christ is in our midst. Peace is promised to all the disparate folks whom Christ has made into a new being. Peace is the fullness of life the Hebrew Scriptures speak of. Peace is the road to freedom from slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. Peace is the risen life of Christ and of the Christian community. This greeting is not merely sharing a nice hello with a friend, not only words of welcome to a stranger, not checking in on how Aunt Tulle is doing. It is the end of invading tribes, the reconciliation of ancient enemies. The slaves escape. The dead are raised. The barriers between humanity and God are torn down. The peace of Christ is in the assembly and human life is recreated by the presence of God.