

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
215-855-4676 + gracelutheranhatfield.org

15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 5, 2021
“The World We Long For” (Isaiah 35:4-7a, James 2:14-17, Mark 7:24-30)
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Of all the ways to die, drowning in one’s own home is inconceivable. Yet these are among the stories that are in the news. Natural disasters have a way of laying bare underlying issues of injustice—in the case of New York City, the tens of thousands of illegally converted basement apartments without windows or a second way out, where poor immigrants, especially, found refuge from the city’s high rental rates. But at the price of their lives? It should not be.

The storm ravaged parts of Hatfield too, though thankfully without loss of life. But on this Labor Day weekend, barbecues and football games are perhaps less compelling than usual. Our knees are weak, our arms tired, our bodies and minds weary. For those affected by flooding, the magnitude of the cleanup effort has been hard to comprehend at a single glance. As some of you know only too well, you just have to start somewhere – one task at a time, one set of helping hands after another, one insurance claim after another, and the job will eventually get done.

But at the moment we are tired. And sorry, Isaiah 35, in a way we kind of don’t want to hear about springs gushing up and the ground becoming pools of water. But let’s take a deep breath and consider where we really are in the midst of this. I think we are in the midst of *shalom*.

This familiar Hebrew word, *shalom*, is usually translated in English as “peace.” But really it signifies all aspects of God’s creation living in harmonious, life-giving relationship with each other. If we step back and take a longer view of Isaiah 35, we have before us one of the most magnificent images of *shalom* in all of scripture:

⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷a the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

The aftermath of a crisis is often where *shalom* becomes immediately visible. It is friends who jump into action to help. It is neighbors you didn’t even know who turn up, saying “Just tell me what I can do to help.” *Shalom* is the hearts and hands of first responders who made nearly 500 water rescues in Montgomery County alone this past week. *Shalom* is the compassion and courage of neighbors who plunged into flooded basement apartments in Queens to try to rescue panic-stricken occupants as the water rose. One wheelchair-bound woman was saved when a neighbor got her up onto a mattress that floated beneath the ceiling until help arrived. *Shalom* is

the litany of gratitude that poured onto the Hatfield Community FB page Thursday for all the forms of assistance given during that dark night. *Shalom* is the conviction that we will make it through this crisis, and the next one, and the next one, together.

You may be thinking, well of course, that is what people do for each other. But these expressions of solidarity in suffering do not necessarily occur automatically. Remember what Jesus told us last week about how evil lurks within human hearts?

Rather, *shalom* begins with the prayerful, worshipful connection that each human being cultivates with God. As this grows, it shapes our life. Cultivating this connection is why you come to church. It is why you choose, week after week, to get up, get dressed, and get yourself in your seat, to hear -- through Holy Scripture read, proclaimed, and sung -- about all the ways that God has remained faithful to us -- and to discover, in return, how we are invited to deepen our relationship with God by standing in solidarity with the world God made.

In the language of the New Testament, *shalom* describes the nature of God's kingdom that Jesus has come to proclaim, the kingdom ruled by love.

Each example Jesus gives of the inbreaking of God's kingdom takes us by surprise because it goes directly against what the world's customs of self-centeredness have trained us to expect. Today's account from Mark is one of the most astonishing. Not only does the Syrophenician woman refuse to be crushed by Jesus' shocking initial dismissal of her request for healing—he first tells her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," meaning that his ministry is for the children of Israel, not foreigners like her. Even more surprisingly, Jesus himself has his eyes opened by this woman's fierce response: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," meaning that there is enough of God's grace for all people. Her insistence on justice *changes Jesus' mind* about what he plans to do. "For saying that, you may go," he tells her. "The demon has left your daughter." If this is not *shalom*, I don't know what is.

Labor Day is *shalom*, too. In the late 19th century the first Monday in September came to be celebrated as a holiday to honor workers and their efforts, and to mark the transition toward legislation that provided for more humane working conditions. But what I really want to tell you today is that Grace Lutheran Church is a powerful expression of *shalom* because of the care you provide through Grace's many active ministries. This church is a place where human dignity is forged through the love of God and neighbor, without partiality, as James says. You worship, and you serve, and faith grows through service and becomes a form of worship as you encounter Christ in the faces of those to whom you minister.

But here is my concern. I am worried about burnout for each of you who is actively involved here. The reality is that we need more hands to take up these forms of joyful service.

A common interview question for prospective pastors is what they are going to do to grow the church. My response is that this growth is primarily YOUR job. My job description, which I just re-read, says I am to help members invite others into the life and ministries of the congregation. I

am here to help, but I need YOU to take the lead. YOU are the ones who must invite people to come to church. YOU need to tell others about what is going on here at Grace. If you believe in our mission “to glorify God, to grow in faith, to give in service, together in Christ,” then be bold. Invite others to come and see, just like Philip did to Nathanael. Come, see, and join in the harmonious and life-giving relationship here that is *shalom*. And just like our cleanup job—one task at a time, one human heart at a time—*shalom* will spread throughout the earth. For this IS the world that we long for.

Amen.