

KNOW PEACE

ISAIAH 11:1–9;
MATTHEW 5:9;
MARK 4:35–41



“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus says in Matthew 5:9, but we can’t begin to make peace until we know peace ourselves. Peace can have so many definitions that surely we will never truly understand peace. But perhaps to *know* peace is not to completely understand peace. Instead, knowing peace so that we can become peacemakers is to nurture our inner life with God in such a way that we *feel* God’s deep peace. We can turn to the wisdom of contemplatives in the Christian tradition to learn the importance of prayer and to

nurture our inner peace. We can look to Jesus himself, who often withdrew from public ministry so he could pray by himself. We can develop practices that help us experience the peace of God.

To know peace, however, is also to understand the vast complexities of peace. It is to know that true peace is not simply about our own sense of calm and serenity, but about making peace with and for our neighbors and the world.

For those of us in the United States in the generations after World War II, we might think of peace as simply an end to war. World War II, at least as it is often taught in history books and popular culture, was a war with a clear beginning and a clear end. On VE day (Victory in Europe Day) and then VJ day (Victory over Japan Day), the war was declared over, the soldiers came home, and peace settled in. One day there was war; the next, there was peace.

Of course, it was not that simple. Communities across Europe and Asia were devastated by the war. The nuclear weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

destroyed those cities and unleashed the possibilities of entirely new horrors of war. Soldiers came home from the war traumatized by what they had seen, and the decades that followed saw some of the biggest military buildup in history.

Fictional weapons manufacturer Tony Stark—also known as Iron Man in the Marvel Comics Universe—likes to say, “Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.”¹ For nearly a century, the United States has operated on this model of peacemaking; that peace can be enforced by those who have the strongest weapons. And now, after decades of unending war in Afghanistan and Iraq, we understand that war is not something that simply starts and ends. We cannot simply declare peace and make it so.

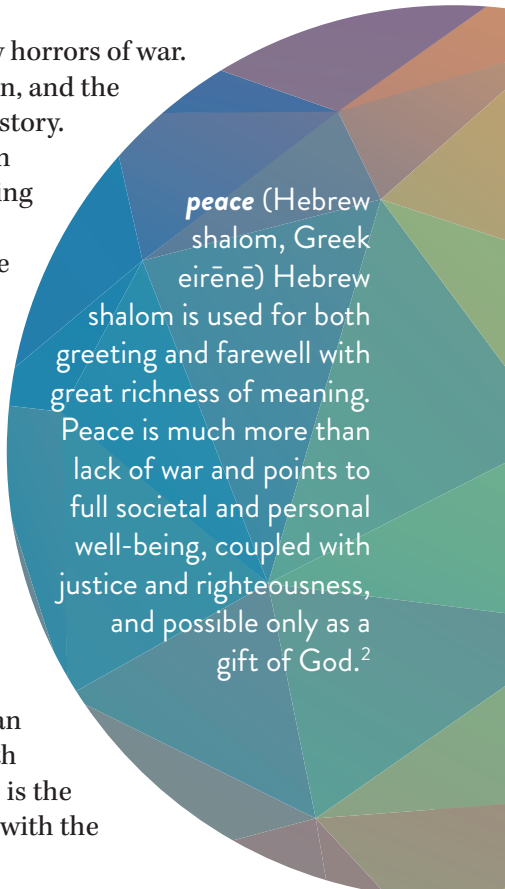
We also misunderstand peace if we assume it to be the opposite of war. We need only look at the violence around us—the mass shootings that happen with increasing frequency, the brutal deaths of Black people at the hands of the police—to see that, though we may not be at war, we are not at peace. In a line that has been attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Addams, and others, we are reminded, “True peace is not merely the absence of war, it is the presence of justice.”

The shalom God envisions for the world is not something that can be enforced or declared. It is a state of being in which we are one with God. It is a state of community in which there is justice for all. Peace is the very nature of God. We humans, created in God’s image and infused with the divine goodness of God, can know peace.

- In what ways has your life been touched by war or violence?

- Even if you feel far removed from violence on a daily basis, what effect has it had on you or your community?

- Think of some times when you felt truly at peace. What were the conditions that led to that feeling?



peace (Hebrew shalom, Greek eirēnē) Hebrew shalom is used for both greeting and farewell with great richness of meaning. Peace is much more than lack of war and points to full societal and personal well-being, coupled with justice and righteousness, and possible only as a gift of God.²

1. Marvel Quotes, “Peace Means Having a Bigger Stick than the Other Guy,” April 5, 2019, <https://marvelquote.com/iron-man/peace-means-having-a-bigger-stick-than-the-other-guy/>.
2. Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 232.

Make a list of practices that help you find inner peace when storms are raging around you. These might be centering prayer, reading the Psalms, listening to music, taking a walk through nature, meeting with a therapist or spiritual director, or calling a friend. How can you build these practices into your routines so that soul-level peacemaking is a regular part of your life?



A PRAYER FOR PEACE

Dona nobis pacem means “Give us peace” in Latin. This prayer is sung in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic in many settings as people pray for peace.



Pray with music as you sing or listen to “Dona Nobis Pacem,” found in the *Glory to God* hymnal #752, or sing along with or listen to the YouTube video “Dona Nobis Pacem” (bit.ly/FMPacem, 2:04). These Latin words are a prayer that means “Give us peace.” As the tune becomes more familiar, try singing the song in Hebrew or Arabic.

Hebrew:

Sim shalom, sim shalom, sim shalom,
sim shalom aleinu.

Arabic:

Rabbu habna salamann tamman
Rabbu habna salamann.

Close your prayer with the following sentences:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Let me be one who tries to live as a maker of peace. Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Knowing peace would be simpler if there was one Scripture passage that explained how to make peace. Instead, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of passages in which peace is mentioned in one way or another. In fact, the entire scriptural witness, from Genesis to Revelation, is woven through with images of God's peace. Peace is not an afterthought, an add-on, to the story; it is the story of God.

Here, we'll explore two passages that offer a glimpse of the vision and the power of God's peace.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

Isaiah
11:1-9

ISAIAH 11:1-9

There are so many Scripture passages about peace that it would be folly to describe one of them as *the* one that describes what peace is. And yet, the eleventh chapter of Isaiah—specifically Isaiah 11:6, is such an iconic image that we can hardly talk about peace without it: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Haven't we seen this image played out in online videos, in which a dangerous animal befriends and looks out for a far more vulnerable one, forging an unlikely friendship? Haven't we been witness to children who are wise enough to see what adults around them do not? We have glimpsed this vision.

It helps to remember the context in which this poetic image was written. The book of Isaiah was written not by one prophet, but by many, over the course of generations. This early section was written in the eighth century BCE, in the kingdom of Judah, at a time before the exile. The prophet was writing to warn of God's judgment and to point toward God's vision of hope for the

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. —Isaiah 11:9



One of the most famous depictions of the wolf and the lamb is the painting by artist and Quaker minister Edward Hicks. Hicks painted more than sixty versions of this scene from Isaiah 11:6, which he called *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

It is notable that Hicks used the word *peaceable* rather than *peaceful*. *Peaceful* means “full of peace.” *Peaceable* means “inclined toward peace.” The passage from Isaiah describes the world not as it is—the world is not peaceful—but as it should and could be. All of creation is good, God declares in Genesis 1, and we are made in God's image. We are inclined toward peace. We have in us the gift and ability to make this vision a reality.

future—a future in which the dangers of the present day would have passed, a future in which even mortal enemies could live together and thrive.

We must hold this image in front of us—both the judgment and the hope—if we are to know peace, for it reminds us that knowing peace is not simply an individual sense of well-being. Peace, in the kingdom of God, is about all of creation living together as one.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” —John 14:27

A STORM AT SEA

Centuries after the prophet Isaiah called the people to look toward God’s vision of peace, Jesus stepped into a boat with his disciples. The winds quickly picked up, and soon the boat was engulfed in crashing waves as the storm raged around them. Panicked, the disciples cried out to Jesus, who cried out to the wind: “Quiet! Be still.”

And the wind stopped.

There are great metaphors in this story. Which of us hasn’t been knocked about by the storms in our lives? Knowing that Jesus has the power to calm the storm, to bring peace to the churning waters, is a source of great comfort. To know peace is to trust that, no matter how much the seas rise and shake, Jesus is in the boat with us, riding out the storm.

This boat ride, of course, is not the end of the story. In this passage, Jesus is revealed to be more powerful than the disciples could have imagined. But the story of Jesus is always one of call and invitation; we are not simply comforted in the storm, we are invited into the work of sheltering those around us who have also been beaten up by the waves.

Toward the end of John’s Gospel, as he is saying goodbye to his disciples, Jesus says this: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Those of us who have received peace from Christ are now sent out to share that peace with the world.

- Which passage speaks most to you? Why?

- Have you seen glimpses of God’s vision of peace in Isaiah 11:6? What made such a situation possible?

- Have you ever been in a metaphorical storm and felt the peace of Jesus? What was that like?



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

As we've seen, God's vision for peace encompasses all of creation. Peace is something that is nurtured within us through prayer and spiritual practice. Peace is also something that is nurtured around us, as we work for justice and an end to violence. Throughout history, Christians have found ways to live into God's vision of peace.

CULTIVATING INWARD AND OUTWARD PEACE

Christian sages and mystics from the past and in the present day have emphasized the link between contemplation and meditation and continuing Jesus' acts of healing and peacemaking. Christian contemplatives teach us about how to nurture inner peace so that we can turn outward and work for peace in our communities. *Contemplation*, in a religious sense, is listening for and cultivating a connection with the divine and a larger web of life through practices such as prayer and meditation. Many people of faith will understand the importance of going on retreat, which sometimes can include long periods of silence or a commitment to prayer routines and seeking renewal in nature. Others may identify with someone like the great peacemaker, Dorothy Day. One of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, she discovered that it was difficult to quiet her mind in monastic settings. Day learned to pray in the midst of the busyness of daily life while doing dishes, editing a paper, cooking dinner, and cleaning. Whatever approach you find most meaningful, listening for God's voice and cultivating an awareness of your connection with other people and the planet is a firm foundation for making peace.

Such inner contemplation ultimately leads us outward, to recognize our dependence upon God, other people, and the planet. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, is widely considered to be one of the most influential spiritual writers of our time. For Merton, solitude and contemplation were a means to deepen the present moment, not a means of escape. Through contemplation, one taps into a deep level of communication that reveals the essence of life in communion with neighbor, nature, and God, rather than in the mastery of resources to satisfy one's own needs. Merton writes, "We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."³ He spent most of his time at the abbey living with other monks, but also chose to live for some time as a hermit. The time he spent in solitude deepened his insights, and his writings reached far beyond the walls of his small house. He spoke prophetically to the major concerns of his time: white supremacy, war, and economic justice. Merton's greatest discovery is that peace is found in the sharing of being rather than just in the sharing of words.



3. Christine Bochen, ed., *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 48.

PEACEMAKING CHURCHES

Once we turn outward, we discover a myriad of ways to work for peace in our world, but Christians have not always been of one mind about how. Peacemaking churches such as Church of the Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers advocate for total pacifism, believing that we, as Christians, “should beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). However, most Reformed Christians uphold the just-war tradition, which attempts to reconcile the commandment that “you shall not kill” (Exodus 20:19) with the duty to do justice and defend people who are weak and vulnerable. But all Christians agree that violence is never God’s intent, even in a world where conflict is frequent and often unavoidable.

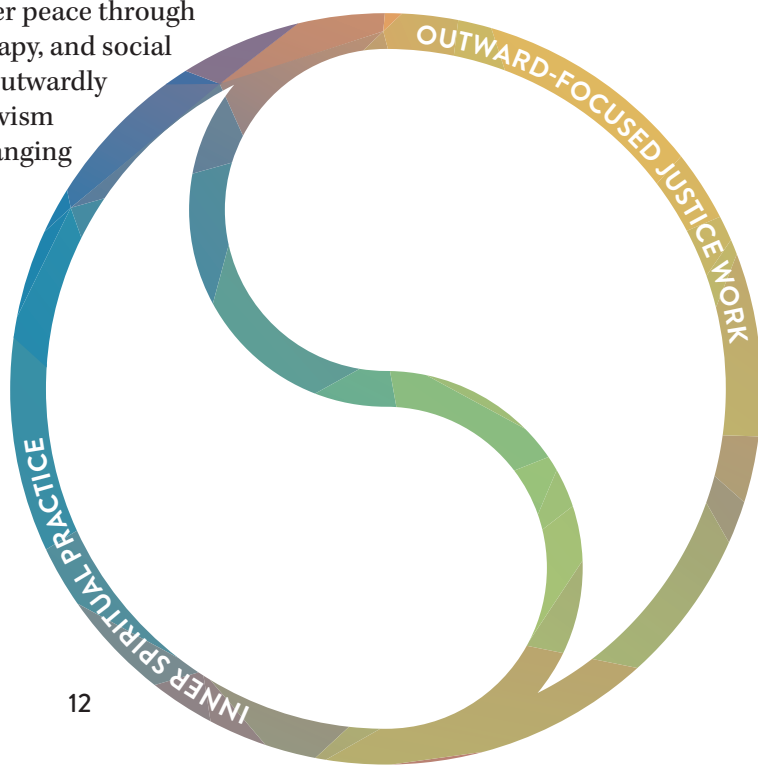
DISCIPLES PEACE FELLOWSHIP

Many Christian traditions have developed organizations whose primary mission is working for peace. The Disciples Peace Fellowship (www.disciplespeace.org) is one such organization. Founded in 1935, DPF works within and on behalf of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to “live out the gospel imperative for peace and justice” through education, advocacy, and collaboration. DPF has a long history of leading the church in supporting conscientious objectors, speaking out on issues of human and civil rights, and educating youth on issues of social justice and peace.

OAKLAND PEACE CENTER

One organization that works at the intersection of cultivating inner peace and working for community justice is the Oakland Peace Center (bit.ly/FMOaklandPeace). Housed in a historic church building in Oakland, California, the OPC is a community of artists, activists, cultural workers, educators, and nonprofits who support one another in their work. Many religious groups participate. Some partner organizations focus on helping individuals find inner peace through prayer, emotional support, therapy, and social services. Other partners work outwardly in the community, through activism and advocacy with a goal of changing unjust systems.

- Can you describe the connection between inner spiritual practice and outward-focused justice work?
- How has this connection been seen in your life?



PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

To know peace is to nurture our spiritual lives so that we can experience the deep peace of Christ. Knowing peace in this way requires intentional practice and an active prayer life. To know peace is also to turn outward toward our neighbors and our world so that we might help build God's shalom. To know peace in this way requires intentional learning and exploration about issues of justice and peace.

Following are some suggestions for putting this peacemaking into practice:

NURTURING OUR INNER SPIRITUAL LIVES

- Make prayer a daily part of your life. This doesn't mean you have to sit quietly every morning or kneel by your bedside every night. You can find ways to pray in the midst of your daily activities: use a walk to think through the activities of the past day and notice where God was at work. Name things you're grateful for before you start eating dinner. Develop a practice of talking with God on your drive to work.
- Make time for solitude and silence. Our lives are busy and the world is loud. Yes, God speaks to us through the activity and the noise, but sometimes it's good to be still and quiet our minds so that we can listen to what God is saying to us.
- Connect with a therapist, counselor, or spiritual director. Working with someone who is trained to help you think things through or listen to God's voice can be transformative in nurturing deep peace.
- Exercise. Our bodies are part of God's good creation. Treating them as such is one way we can honor God.
- Create. Paint or draw. Make something with clay. Grow something in the garden. Write a poem. We are created in the image of our Creator, and thus creators ourselves. Don't let this part of you lie fallow.
- Practice Sabbath regularly. Take breaks from work. Turn off social media. Do something for no other reason than that it brings you joy.





TURNING OUTWARD TO OUR COMMUNITIES

- Learn what's happening in your church. Find out if your congregation's tradition has a peace organization like the Disciples Peace Fellowship mentioned on page 12. Explore the ways your denomination has spoken out and worked for peace in the past.
 - Join the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Learn more about this interfaith peace effort (forusa.org), or other similar organizations.
 - Explore the work of the Oakland Peace Center (www.oaklandpeacecenter.org), especially the list of partner organizations. What do you think each organization offers?
 - Learn what's happening in your community. Find organizations in your local community that are working for peace and justice. Learn more about the issues they focus on and explore ways you can get involved.
- What other practices would you add to these lists?

Take some time to journal about these practices, or jot some notes.

- What practice can you do yet today?
- What can you do this week?
- This month?

FOLLOWING JESUS

God calls us to a life of peacemaking, but as we have seen, knowing peace is no easy task. We long for the sort of inner peace that calms our weary souls. We turn to Christ when the storms of life rage around us. We pray for peace in a world caught in unending war, in our communities trapped by unending violence. We know that God’s vision of shalom, in which lion and lamb lie down together, lies right in front of us; and yet it seems so unattainable, so far away.

To know peace is to trust God with our whole lives, to spend time in prayer, to honor our bodies and our minds as part of God’s good creation. To know peace is to understand that peace is not simply an end to violence, and to work toward shalom so that all of God’s creation might live as one.

In the next session, we take a step back and explore some of the systems in which we are all entangled, systems that we will need to dismantle if we are to find our way to peace.

➤ After exploring this session, what do you think it means to know peace?

➤ What will you do to know peace more deeply?

Find and play a recording of the children’s song “Peace like a River.” Notice how the words and music speak to you.

End with the same prayer used to begin this session:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Let me be one who tries to live as a maker of peace. Amen.

