

**“The God of Peace and the Peace of God”**  
**Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 22:1-14; Exodus 32:1-14**

**Matthew 22:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

<sup>4</sup>Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’

<sup>5</sup>But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup>while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

<sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

<sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup>and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

<sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.”

**Exodus 32:1-14**

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

<sup>2</sup>Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup>So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup>He took the gold from

them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

<sup>5</sup>When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” <sup>6</sup>They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup>they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’

<sup>9</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup>Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

<sup>11</sup>But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup>Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup>Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

<sup>14</sup>And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### **Philippians 4:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any

excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

### The Sermon

In 1994, a small news item caught the attention of anyone fortunate enough to have come across it. A 73-year-old Iowan named Alvin Straight had learned that his 80-year-old brother Henry, in Wisconsin, was gravely ill after having suffered a stroke.<sup>i</sup>

The two brothers had not spoken to each other in almost ten years.

Alvin Straight had poor vision and no driver's license and, for whatever reason, "didn't trust public transportation."<sup>ii</sup> And so, on July 5, 1994, he attached a trailer with a few supplies to a 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower, and headed for Wisconsin. Driving along the shoulders of mostly back roads, camping out at night, and never exceeding 5 miles an hour, Alvin Straight spent six weeks traveling the 240 miles from Laurens, Iowa to reunite with his estranged brother in Wisconsin.

It wasn't long before a movie was made about what Alvin Straight had done, and it was appropriately titled *The Straight Story*.

Somehow, there is almost as much amazement around that little movie as there is around the actual event.

For one thing, the name practically wrote itself. Alvin Straight was a no-nonsense man, didn't care for any fanfare; he declined every invitation to appear on talk shows or do any other kind of publicity.

And the movie is pretty much the same way: totally devoid of innuendo. The Midwestern people whom Alvin Straight meets along the way are not presented as alien, or weird, or secretly perverted; nor for that matter are they given a Hollywood gloss of radiance or nobility. It's just the story of Alvin Straight: *The Straight Story*.

It's also amazing because of some of the people involved. It was directed by David Lynch. David Lynch is a high-art filmmaker who pushes boundaries; he usually makes movies that are designed to confound expectations and defy easy

explanation. What in the world is this guy doing directing a quiet, pleasant, G-rated movie?

The lead actor was a 78-year-old, more or less retired actor and former stunt man named Richard Farnsworth. He took the role purely out of admiration for Alvin Straight. What the production team knew, but the audience didn't, was that Mr. Farnsworth was dying as he made the movie. I'm grateful to report that he was able to receive the many accolades that were bestowed on him after the movie came out, including attending the Academy Awards as a nominee for best actor.

Stanley Kauffmann, arguably the most insightful and maybe the toughest film critic ever, who had been in the business for the better part of a century (literally: he had worked in the theater in the 1930s and wrote this review in 1999) pronounced *The Straight Story* to be a "perfect" movie.<sup>iii</sup> Two years later he said it had "reached pure spirituality through an utterly vernacular lexicon."<sup>iv</sup>

In other words, in using the simple language of ordinary human beings, the story of Alvin Straight, journeying 240 miles on a lawn mower to see his estranged and ailing brother, had achieved pure spirituality.

I mention all this because today we have heard two Bible passages—one from Matthew; one from Exodus—

that conjure images of people,  
 masses of broken, anxious people,  
 letting God down,  
 rejecting God,  
 trifling with God,  
 ignoring God,  
 all too predictably and, you would think, almost intentionally  
 drawing God's awesome, furious and terrifying wrath;

and then we have a benediction from Paul that speaks in one paragraph about the peace of God, and in the next, the God of peace.

And we're invited, in the context of the brokenness among people and the brokenness between people and God, to think about our own peace, and the places where we are not yet at peace, and to wonder what kinds of journeys we are going to be called on to make if we ever hope to get there.

Paul used that word, “peace”—the Greek word is *eirene*—in several of the letters he wrote to congregations in the first generation of the Church, letters which now make up a large part of the New Testament.

That Greek word “*eirene*” comes from earlier words that mean “to join together” or to be “at one,” and implies peace, quietness, and rest along with a sense of being “set at one again,”<sup>v</sup> as in “atonement.” If you know anyone named Irene, this is where her name comes from.

Paul often used that word as a blessing, either in the formal greeting at the beginning of a letter and for a benediction at the end, or both. “Grace to you, and peace from God,” he writes at the beginning of the letter to the Galatians (1:3); in other words, with God’s grace, may you experience the rest, the quiet peace, of being set at one again.

In trying to persuade the Jewish Christians in Rome and the non-Jewish Christians in Rome not to use their differing views about food as wedges against one another, he said, “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

And to that conflicted and complicated Church in Rome, he said, “There will be...glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good” (Romans 2:9-10), and “to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6).

*Let your gentleness be known to everyone, Paul wrote to the church in Philippi.*

*The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace—the God of being made whole, set as one again—will be with you.*

What journey do you need to make to get things out back together as one? To find wholeness?

John Calvin had published his first edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion in 1536, in which he argued that human wisdom was about knowing God, and knowing ourselves; and he argued that human only have direct access to the knowledge of God from the Bible.

That meant that the whole institutional Church in which he was raised was in urgent and near-total need of reform.

Oddly enough, the institutional Church did not say, “You’re right, Calvin; let’s tear this whole thing down and start over.”

Enormous power was at stake—not only the power of economics, the power of politics, the power of social structures, but the fundamental power of each individual’s core beliefs about what is true about God and what is true about ourselves, and what is right in terms of the relationship between the two.

There was bitter and violent conflict, and it was happening all over Europe. The Church, which in the West had been the *one* Church, was being torn apart.

Calvin was invited to come and be part of the Reformation that was going on in Geneva, Switzerland, which he did.

Two years later, he was banished by the city council, and the next year, a bishop in Provence named Cardinal Sadoleto wrote a letter to the citizens of Geneva, who had become part of the Reformation, denouncing Calvin and asking them to return to Catholic Church.

Sadoleto’s letter to the Reformed population in Geneva is always called *irenic*, after that same Greek word for peace.

He spoke in pastoral terms: he wanted peace, specifically the peace of being set at one again.

They could forget what that rat Calvin had written and taught and preached; Rejoin your brothers and sisters, Sadoleto said.

Mother Church is calling you.

The Holy Father is calling you.

With all those family terms, Sadoleto's message to Geneva was simply: all of you who have left the Church, it's time to come home, so the Church, once again, can be one, and whole.

Then we can have shalom. Then we can have peace.

The Genevans asked Calvin to write a response to Cardinal Sadoleto, which he did.

And Calvin wrote to Sadoleto, "If you had attacked my private character, I could easily have forgiven it in consideration of your learning, and in honor of letters.

"But when I see that my ministry, which I feel assured is supported and sanctioned by a call from God, is wounded through my side, for me to be silent wouldn't be an act of patience, but of disloyalty, treachery..."

He said: When God gave me the charge of the Church of Geneva, it pleased God to make their safety my highest care, and I was bound to be faithful to that church forever. And what I now see is that the worst snares imaginable have been laid for that church.<sup>vi</sup>

And it was the struggle to avoid those "snares" that gave shape to the Reformation.

You could send every Reformed Christian in Geneva back to the pre-Reformation Catholic Church, but as long as their conscience told them that this was not right, that the Church had strayed irretrievably from God's plan, they could never have *eirene*. They could never truly feel *whole*; they could never *be* "set at one again."

In order to be at peace, they had to be confident that they were right with God.

And the Church before Reformation no longer felt that way to them.

Psalm 106 has a verse that goes,

"Both we and our ancestors have sinned;  
we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly" (Psalm 106:6).

And it retells the story from Exodus (Psalm 106:19-23):

*They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image.  
They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.  
They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,*

*wondrous works in the land of Ham,  
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.*

*Therefore he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.*

Moses went up the mountain, and he was there for a long time.

And these people,  
who had been wandering in the wilderness all this time,  
following this man who now had been gone  
for an uncomfortably long time,  
got nervous, and began, in a way, to fall apart.

They lacked a sense of oneness,  
they were too anxious to know the quiet rest of peace—  
they would have said *shalom* or “wholeness”—  
they were, literally, *rest-less*,  
and in their restless anxiety,  
they turned to something they knew was not God,  
to treat it like God.

What happens to you when you become restless?

What do you turn to that you know isn't God, in the subconscious hope that it will offer you some artificial substitute for the true peace of God?

God said to Moses, “You have to go back down there! Your people have acted perversely; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, worshiping it, sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’

God said, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now leave me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

But Moses pleaded with God: “Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind, and don't bring disaster on your people.

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,

how you swore to them, saying to them,  
 ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven,  
 and all this land that I have promised  
 I will give to your descendants,  
 and they shall inherit it forever.’”

And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

John Calvin’s monumental approach to the Christian religion started with the fundamental idea that wisdom is about knowing God, and knowing ourselves.<sup>vii</sup>

What would need to happen, in order for you to recognize that the God who is your Creator, and the God who is our ultimate Judge, is also the God of peace—the God who loves you enough to die for you, so that you may be made whole and that you and God may be made whole?

And what do *you* need to do to find the peace of God—the non-anxious rest of being at one with yourself and with God?

For Alvin Straight, it was a journey of hundreds of miles, in pouring rain and unforgiving sun, weeks going by at five miles an hour.

But before that, it was the conviction that after ten years of distant silence, it was time to see his brother again, if only for one last time.

Jesus said: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (John 13:34).

He said, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
 and with all your soul, and with all your mind,  
 and with all your strength.  
 And you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31).

And after he had been crucified, and had returned to give the disciples the great commission, he said, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

I cannot be set at one again until I am whole with the people who are most important to me.

And I cannot find true peace until I can share with the people around me—all of my neighbors all over the world—the blessing of having the broken pieces of our lives being set at one again: to feel, at long last, wholeness, *shalom*—peace.

And I can only find true peace if I am right with God.

I can't get there on my own.

But I know there is someone who can deliver me.

May the peace of God  
 cover, protect and defend and keep safe  
 your heart and your mind,

And may you always know  
 that the God of peace—the God of oneness, wholeness, quiet rest—  
 is already with you, and always will be.

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<sup>i</sup> Information about Alvin Straight referenced here comes from <http://data.desmoinesregister.com/famous-iowans/alvin-straight>. Retrieved October 14, 2017. At the time, various national magazines, including Time, ran brief stories about the event.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://data.desmoinesregister.com/famous-iowans/alvin-straight>. Retrieved October 14, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> I remember this from reading the contemporary review in The New Republic. Alas, I haven't been able to find it on line as of this writing. But 20 years later I am still as gobsmacked at Kauffmann's pronouncement as I was the day I read it.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/92197/david-lynch-mulholland-drive>. Retrieved October 14, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Per Strong's Analytical Concordance.

<sup>vi</sup> These paragraphs, when not quoting directly, are very close paraphrases from the first section of Calvin's letter to Sadoleto.

<sup>vii</sup> "The First Book treats of the knowledge of God the Creator. But as it is in the creation of man that the divine perfections are best displayed, so man also is made the subject of discourse. Thus the whole book divides itself into two principal heads—the former relating to the knowledge of God, and the latter to the knowledge of man."—The first sentences of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion.