Perhaps some of us have experienced hurricanes or seen something of the damage left in their wake. A hurricane, of course, is a storm with cyclonic winds that are accompanied by rain, thunder and lightning. They are fierce storms with relentless winds that continue for hours. But the interesting thing about a hurricane is its eye—a place of perfect peace in its center. Though the winds blow all around, there are none in the center.

The eye of the hurricane is a good illustration of the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of the Prince of Peace. In that kingdom, there is peace. When Christ comes again to earth, all of the earth will be filled with that peace. Until that time God calls upon Christian communities to embody that peace. Despite whatever goes on around us – however much the storms of evil, or injustice or dissension, or greed or hatred – relentlessly bang at our doors, we embody the peace of Christ.

Perhaps we think of peace as an end to war or conflict or as some sentimental feeling of well-being. In fact, these are definitions of the word, “peace” that are most often used by secular society. When we think of peace in this way, it’s difficult to reconcile the image of the peaceable kingdom found in Isaiah with the image of John the Baptist calling Pharisees brood of vipers and throwing chaff into the fire. But the Biblical concept of peace isn’t about an end to conflict or war or about sentimentality. It’s about Christ who came to earth in love for us to reconcile us to God through His love for us and sacrifice for us. It’s about all the fruits that come about as a result of that sacrifice in our lives and in our communal life together.

The Biblical concept of peace has its origins in the Hebrew word “shalom,” which means whole, undivided and uninjured. It is used most often in connection with communities of people and particularly as it relates to covenant relationships; for example, God’s covenant with the Israelites. God covenanted with the Israelites to be their God – to always be with them. As their part of the covenant, the Israelites were supposed to put God first and love God with all their hearts. They failed at keeping that covenant, and God allowed them to get into trouble, such as being defeated by the Babylonians and being sent into exile. Although the pain of being taken into exile was severe, the bigger pain was that God took away his “shalom” or his being at one with Israel. Israel was no longer whole. Isaiah is writing about the time when Israel will be restored not only to its homeland but in its covenantal relationship with God that originated back to the days of Abraham. Israel was allowed under King Cyrus to go back into its homeland and God restored the shalom relationship until Israel blew it again through its sin.

Then came Christ who Himself is shalom. When God sent his Son Christ into the world, it wasn’t just to be shalom to the natural born children of Abraham, but to all those who become children of Abraham through our baptism, through our faith – to adopted children if you will. It is our faith in Christ that makes us heirs to this covenant now – heirs of that shalom – that wholeness and that oneness of Christ. Eventually, all the world will be part of this community – Jesus will come again and we will see all manner of miracles as the world is transformed. But for now, we – the community of faithful here – are this covenant community. Because Christ came and died once for all, we know that now, in the times after the New Testament, or New Covenant, God will never remove shalom from us. As part of the new covenant that came out of Christ’s love and sacrifice for us, we are forever whole with God through Christ.

Although nothing we can ever do – or not do – can ever remove us from this covenant, we are called to some responsibilities as a covenant community with God. We are called to stay in relationship with God and to follow God wherever that leads. Sometimes that might mean being in conflict with evil or sin or injustice in the world around us, if in doing so we remain whole in Christ. It means we discern together in community about what God calls us to in harmony. That doesn’t mean we’ll agree all the time, but it means that we are striving together, led by the Holy Spirit, respecting each other and complementing each other, just as singers do when they harmonize together each voice singing its part to make a beautiful whole. It means we try our best to keep the covenant, realizing that we will fail. When we do fail at putting God first or loving our neighbor, we repent – we make confession – and we come to Jesus to ask forgiveness. We exchange the peace – the shalom – the wholeness – with each other. We dine together with Christ at the table. We go forth into the storms of the world ready for the transformation that comes about through the Presence of the Risen Christ in our lives.

And we know that as we go into those storms, our community –our little bit of the Kingdom of God -- will always remain protected at peace in the center – in shalom – in Christ.

Amen