Christmas is a time of being close to people. And I mean that figuratively and literally. Emotionally, we're close to many people during the Christmas season. We receive cards, letters, and photographs from people we love and care about. And this contact makes us feel close to them. We give and receive gifts from family and friends, renewing our bonds of friendship through generosity and shared interests. These gifts bring us closer together. Our lives are filled with holiday traditions, bringing to mind decades of good memories and warm feelings. These traditions makes us feel close to loved ones who may not even be alive anymore.

But Christmas is also a time of being literally close to people. Stores that are jam packed with customers. Homes filled with family and friends, gathered for Christmas and New Years parties. Even our church will most likely be packed full of people as we sit shoulder to shoulder on Christmas Eve, then slowly squeeze our way through the crowded narthex back to our family festivities.

Christmas is a time of being close to people. And, for an introvert like myself, that's not always a good thing. There are plenty of times when I just want to escape during Christmas. Run away from the people and the noise and the activity and just find a quiet spot to relax and regroup.

But, then again, that's a pretty common sentiment. Lots of people like to get away from it all, from time to time. Find a quiet, tranquil beach and lay in the sun. Find a well-stocked lake and sit in a boat with a fishing rod. Find a cozy chair in front of a warm fireplace with only the company of a good book. When people think of a peaceful place, these are the kinds of images that often come to mind.

And ultimately, what all of these have in common, is a desire to escape. Escape people. Escape work. Escape responsibility. Escape life. We look at our lives and we say, "My life isn't peaceful, therefore I need to escape from it."

I spoke last week about the various false gods in our lives that steal away our peace. Often taking our peace even as they promise to give us peace. Last week, I talked specifically about possessions. About how we turn to possessions for security and comfort and luxury and peace. But really, all they give us is a lack of contentment. All they do is make us desire more and more and more. And prevent us from finding true contentment in God's provision and the hope of Christ's salvation.

This week, we tackle another false god offering us false peace. The god of escape. Which really doesn't sound like it should be such an awful thing. I mean, sure, there are sinful forms of escape.

The alcoholic who escapes from his troubles by getting drunk every evening is certainly engaging in a sinful form of escape. As is the porn addict who escapes into a fantasy world of lust. Or the gambler who escapes into the casino on a daily basis. In fact, pretty much any addiction is a sinful form of escape. One that is harmful to body, mind, and soul.

But there are healthy forms of escape, aren't there? Is it really so wrong to open a good book or a turn on a favorite movie when you just want to forget the world? No, probably not, in most circumstances. But I'm not really talking about those individual, momentary escapes.

I'm talking about building your life around escape. Making escape your habit. Your lifestyle. Your reason for existence. Most of all, finding peace through escape. Such that you never need to deal with the world or its troubles at all.

What does this look like? Well, it comes in many forms. For example, you can have the escape that comes from avoidance. Which sounds good, right? You know that a conversation will just end in an argument, so you don't have the conversation. It sounds like a peaceful solution.

Except that, sometimes the conversation needs to be had. Sometimes there's been a sin committed. Someone has sinned against you. They need to know that they have sinned against you. They also need to know that you forgive them.

Or the reverse. You've sinned against them. And so you need to do the terribly painful act of confessing that sin to your neighbor. Of repenting of that sin. Of requesting their forgiveness so that your relationship can be restored. But also knowing that they may not give that forgiveness. That they may use the very sin you have confessed against you.

The world says, avoid it. Escape it. Brush the whole thing under the rug and pretend it never happened. But God's Word says to deal with it. Or else risk the whole thing becoming a source of bitterness and anger.

Another prime example of escape is the way we run from our Christian duty. The world is full of people who need our help. They need our financial help. They need our physical help. They need our spiritual help. They are dying – in body and soul – and they need us to bring them words and actions of life. To be the hands and feet of Christ. To speak good news to them in the midst of an evil world.

Which sounds great... until we try to do it. And then things get overwhelming. Because there are so many people in need. And we can't help everyone. So who do we help first and how much do we help them and how do we know if they really need our help and what is the best way to help them? And what about me and my family and my friends and my needs? Don't they matter? Don't I matter?

And things spiral out of control until we're ready to simply give up. We pick one or two things that are easy to do. Say that we have done the bare minimum. And escape into blissful apathy toward anyone else.

Escape is such a pleasant idol to worship. Avoidance and apathy is such easy gods to obey. Until it comes time to deal with our own sins. Until the guilt of the sins we have committed towards others begins to catch up with us. Until the shame of our apathy searches us out, like God searching out Adam and Eve in their nakedness in the Garden of Eden. Until all those sinful vices that we use to escape from life and responsibility begin to take their toll on our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

And then we try to escape. But there is no escape. Because we're trying to escape from the eyes of God. And he sees everything. That's the false peace of escape. It's only a temporary peace. It's only a momentary reprieve from God's commands. And then that Law comes crashing down upon us with all it's weight and terror.

Paul talks about this false peace in our Epistle lesson. It's the false peace of being alone. Which feels good, until you realize that you're only alone because you're separated from Christ. You're alienated from the people of God. You're a stranger to God's promises. You have no hope and no God to turn to. And suddenly, that escape feels very lonely and very scary.

And what you need is true peace. The peace that comes from Jesus Christ. Which was a peace that came through terrible conflict. The conflict of an innocent man arrested and put on trial. Of his head crowned with thorns and his back cut with whips. Of him being nailed to a cross and stabbed with a spear.

It's ironic. The three groups who played a part in Jesus' death – the Pharisees, Herod, and Pilate – they all hated each other. They were in constant conflict. But they found a twisted sort of false peace in agreeing to Jesus' death. But in doing so, they gave us a true peace with God.

For he himself is our peace. He broken down every wall between us and the Father. He has brought Jew and Gentile together into one new man. And he has reconciled us with God, killing all hostility with him. His death and resurrection has preached peace to all who are far off and all who are near.

He has given us a peace that the world cannot give. And it won't look like the world's peace. Because confessing your sins and forgiving others is hard. And sometimes results in more frustration than we would like. Doing your Christian duty to love your neighbor as yourself is hard and sometimes result in more stress and work than we would prefer.

Most of all, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that just wants to escape and worship it's false peace will almost always result in conflict. Being a Christian puts a target on your back. The waters of Holy Baptism made you a child of God, but it also made you an enemy of the devil and of the unbelieving world. And, from a worldly perspective, that isn't peaceful at all.

The peace we find is in the peace of knowing that just as Christ came to bring us peace with God as a baby in Bethlehem, so he is coming to bring us peace once again. And the peace he brings then will be peace with all creation. For he will take away sin forever. He will abolish the gods of escape and apathy, of avoidance and false peace. And he will bring us the true peace that comes from being united by his blood.

The true peace that comes from being figuratively and literally brought closer together with those we loved. Even those who have died. That we may celebrate peace come to earth forevermore. Amen.