

“Led by the Child of Peace”

When I realized that the Advent candle that would be lit this morning was the candle of PEACE, I immediately thought of Isaiah 11:1-9. This passage is often referred to as the description of the “peaceable kingdom”. Isaiah wrote these words at a time when the people of God really needed to hear them. And so do we.

The 9th chapter of Isaiah contains the familiar prophecy of the coming of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace that we heard earlier as our candles were lit. But with the exception of these words, Isaiah has, up to this point, been filled with words of judgment and doom. God’s people were chosen and called through their father, Abraham, and given a promise of land and descendants. Yet they have lived through slavery in Egypt, the Exodus in the desert, and persecution from the Philistines, the Edomites and the Moabites to name a few. They have watched their sister country fall to Assyria and in the words preceding our sermon text this morning, Isaiah tells them that God will use Assyria like an ax to get rid of the briars and thorns in THEIR country as well.

Yet the words that Isaiah offers to us are a "bold declaration about the character of God offered to a demoralized people". (1) In order to reassure God's people that peace can come to them in a time when their lives were so uncertain, Isaiah begins by recalling God’s covenant made with his servant David. God promised David that he would establish a kingdom where David's ancestors would remain on the throne over the house of Judah forever. By recalling the promises made to David the people of God are

reassured that, though God may have been silent, He has not forgotten them. And so He begins to tell them how Israel's restoration will take place and what kind of leader they can expect.

The qualities described that will be given to the one who will rise from Jesse's branch are ones that we can covet for our world leaders today as we pray for peace to come to us. Isaiah tells us that God's servant will be blessed with wisdom and understanding. By this he means the practical wisdom that enables a ruler to face reality and deal with people fairly. Then he tells us that he will be given the spirit of counsel and might. This refers to the astute judgment he will have with regard to diplomatic and military authority. Last, we are told that this leader will understand the need to respect and know the one true God. Wouldn't our world today be blessed by such leadership?

Next, because Judah had become a corrupt nation, surrounded by hostile foreign powers, Isaiah promises that there will be a revival of righteousness, justice and faithfulness in the land. That the poor will be treated with mercy and freed from oppression and that people would once again begin to value the righteousness of God over the sinfulness of humankind. This sounds so much like the Beatitudes that we heard earlier. Jesus echoes in his Sermon on the Mount that peace will come in a way that turns our expectations of righteousness upside down.

But the most gripping part of the passage is the picture of peace that Isaiah paints. He basically pairs animals together that are known to be natural predators who thrive on each other's offspring. A wolf and a lamb. A leopard and a goat. A lion and a calf. A child and a serpent. Isaiah promises that God will bring about a kingdom where these creatures will live together in harmony and where no one will receive injury or pain. And

this idea of peace is JUST the kind of prophecy that WE need to hold on to in OUR world today as we struggle with the realities of racial unrest in our country, fear for the safety of our children, wars still fought daily in parts of the world. These circumstances make our prayers for peace even more fervent. So as we look for the coming of the Christchild again into our world, it is quite reasonable to ask how OUR prayers will be answered.

As 21st century Christians, we know the answer that the Israelites received. While the Israelites were expecting a “Mighty God”, they got the “Prince of Peace” instead. Indeed, when Jesus came in the form of a baby born in a barn to an unknown carpenter and his fiancée, the Jews could not accept that this was the ruler that had been promised to them. How could this child, born to people from an obscure village of unimportance to the world be the long awaited King? How could HE be the one to bring the kingdom that looked like the picture they had longed for?

Well, if the Jews had been paying attention, they would have known that this was indeed the little child who will lead us all to peace. And in time they would have recognized that *this* child, when he became a man, possessed all of the qualities that Isaiah foretold. He had the wisdom and understanding to deal fairly with the adulterous woman, the corrupt tax collector Zacchaeus, and the traitor Judas. But the people could not see his wisdom and understanding.

If God’s chosen ones had listened carefully, they would have understood that Jesus’ answer to Pilate, the Pharisees, the scribes and others was that the rules of legalism needed to bend to the law of love. And they would have seen a son that feared and respected his Father enough to be obedient, even to the point of death. But they could not

see the promise fulfilled. Indeed, Jesus' ministry embodied by the Beatitudes, is a peace seeking way that is still hard for us all to accept.

Perhaps that is why we, too, sometimes have trouble seeing God's wisdom, understanding and promises around us when we face difficult decisions or circumstances. Because when we are tired, impatient, disappointed or ill, it is harder to hold on to the promise of peace. In those moments our lives and our world seem anything but peaceful. But by giving us such unexpected lessons on how the world will be led to find peace, I believe that both Isaiah and Jesus are telling us the same thing. That peace begins in the simplest way and that is – in the heart of every individual.

When one person, symbolized by a creature of God in Isaiah's passage, decides to love the most unexpected creature, peace can come. If ONE lamb dares to snuggle up warmly next to a lion maybe we are being told to get close to those whom we *perceive* as our enemies and try to see things from their perspective. If the cub of a lion and the calf of a cow can play together, perhaps we are being told that we can work and play and even worship with people who don't think just like we do, look like we do or even believe exactly the same way we believe and by doing so, bring peace to the earth.

Because I believe that is it the peace of one person, the effort of one heart, mind or spirit that ultimately leads to the peace of a family, a congregation and even a nation. But we have to be open minded enough to take a risk, make a change, or do the unexpected, as the Beatitudes and the prophecy tell us.

I bring this up now because, with the announcement of Kay Johnson' retirement, this church will have completely changed its staff in the span of one year, with the exceptions of our musicians and even Dean has been here less than a year! We have also

just elected a Pastoral Nominating Committee, which is the next logical step on our journey with God but this means even more change. Friends, that is a lot of change in a short amount of time. Change is always hard – especially for us “church people”. By the way, do you know how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb? CHANGE – MY GRANDMOTHER GAVE THAT LIGHT BULB!!!

But I have found in my own experience that, when we trust God enough to let God truly have control of our lives, the changes that God steers us to are always a blessing. My being here is a case in point.

In November of last year, I heard that Nazareth Presbyterian was going to be hiring an Interim minister. I mentioned it to my husband and I really should have known better. He LOVED this church when I filled in for David Sutton in 2010. And while I knew it was time for me to make a change, after more than 15 years of institutional ministry, I kept thinking in my mind "but God called me to be a CHAPLAIN." My husband encouraged me not to be so closed minded – to CONSIDER a change. So it was actually his faith in God and what God could do with my life that gave me the courage to listen to the Spirit.

Then, after much prayer, I decided to trust God completely and when I did, immediately I felt led to apply for the Interim position. That ONE change in my life that started out as an uncertain adventure has led to a time of a huge blessing for me both personally and professionally. I will never be able to thank you and thank God enough for the peace that has come to my heart from the experience I have had here. You have truly changed my thoughts about ministry and opened me up to a new world of seeing how the Spirit can work in my life.

So as this congregation continues to face more times of uncertainty and has to fully lean into the leading of the Holy Spirit, I encourage you to hold on to the peace that Isaiah and Jesus portray when they show us that peace will come, often in ways that we don't anticipate. When those who mourn are comforted, when the meek inherit the earth, even when the righteous are persecuted in the name of the child in the manger, then peace will be ours. And let us remember that it is ultimately that child, born beneath the shadow of the cross, who will lead us to the greatest peace of all.

So as we come to receive the blessings from the Lord's Table, may each of us experience God's peace in our hearts. May we remember that the manger that Jesus was placed in was foretelling of the tomb that would obtain our peace. May we have the faith to listen and the courage to follow where the little child is leading us so that we can continue to share that peace and show God's grace to each other, the community and the world. Amen.

(1) Every Valley, Jessica Miller Kelley, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014,
page 5.