

FOLLOW THE LIGHT TOWARDS PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-9

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
7 December 2014

It's no surprise to me that some people would rather sleep in than come to church and hear God's promise to make the world more peaceful. It's so hard to believe it, isn't it?

We pour our young people all over the Middle East and they come back traumatized, mentally and emotionally, they come back without their limbs and sometimes without their families, and yet there is no peace. It's so hard to believe that peace is possible. I think I'll just hit the snooze button on the alarm and sleep in this morning.

It's no surprise to me that some people would rather go to Starbucks with the paper than come to church and hear God's promise to make the world more peaceful. It's so comforting to sit in a coffee shop where the music is hip and the beverages taste just the way they should. You can choose to read the sports section and marvel at the changing fortunes of Cleveland teams, and then the entertainment section and plan which holiday movies you want to see, and then the travel section and dream about places you want to visit.

Does anyone really believe that peace is possible? We thought the cold war was over, that Russia had become just another ally, and now, instead, as one person wrote in a letter to the Plain Dealer this week, "It feels like 1938 all over again and that Europe is facing a new Hitler."

Let's all leave here and go to the gym. At least there we can feel in control. We can decide how long to exercise, how many calories to burn. We don't have to hear this foolishness about peace being possible. Does anyone believe that we can achieve peace and justice in this country? How is it possible that we are re-living the race riots of the 1960's, that people's hearts and minds and actions still reveal deep-seated suspicion of the other, that so many people live in despair and fear?

Yet here we are, and here is the word of God.

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.

The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Do you know where and when these words were born? These words from Isaiah were not spoken in a time when everything was peaceful and beautiful. Isaiah was not watching a dazzling sunset. He was watching the dazzling swords of the great and

overpowering Assyrian army as they sliced their way through his native land of Palestine, leaving nothing but a trail of blood and agony. He was living through what has been called the first holocaust of the Jews. It occurred between 740 and 700 B.C.D. Five times during these 40 years the Assyrian army, the vast and superior Assyrian army, stampeded through the hill country of Israel bringing terror and destruction wherever it went.

With no regard for anyone's culture, with no regard for anyone's religion, with no regard for anyone else's life, they came like a scorpion plague, devouring everything and everyone in their path. Over and over and over, the people of Israel had been ravaged. The horrid sounds of war were ever familiar. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with a confidence that it would reach maturity? It was a horrible forty years, those years in which Isaiah lived.

And Isaiah wasn't happy with the leadership from his own people. Words such as these would flow from a prophet plainly fed up with the pathetic attempts at leadership he witnessed from the king and his court in Jerusalem. He dreamed of something far better, and he imagined that God had that "something better" in mind.

Isaiah begins his vision with a return to the old idea that the kings of Israel and Judah must, by divine decree, always be directly descended from the great David, the king by which all others are to be measured.

This new king will not rely on traditional ways of judgment, but will go far beyond his predecessors, bending over backward on behalf of the poor and the meek, making certain that justice is offered to them, despite those who would deny it to them. Plainly,

Isaiah claims that kings too often have offered so-called justice to those who, like them, are rich and powerful. This new king will be different in every way.

And with the coming of the new king, the creation itself will be transformed. The animals that are natural enemies—wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calf and lion—will crouch down together in peace and contentment, all tended and led by a tiny child.

If you are skeptical that this could ever happen, I tell you, I understand. But yet we are here, and we have hope. Today's passage tells us that God's will is for each of us to experience peace. Peace which is the absence of violence and fear, and peace which is the presence of wholeness and health. When we experience peace, we are close to God. When we are close to God, we experience peace.

Peace is, then, the work of politics and the work of diplomacy, and it is also spiritual work. I stand here this morning as someone who has not given up on peace. We lit the candle of peace this morning, and we lit the candle of hope last week, because peace and hope go together. They are both tiny flickers of light in our world, but their light transforms the darkness.

Peace is possible because we have seen glimpses of it in our lifetimes. We have seen it happen that people who were once enemies begin to see the other as a human being. We have seen it happen that people who were once tormented by guilt finally forgive themselves and are at peace with themselves. We have seen people put down the bottle, put away the gambling habit, seek help for the addiction, and live the life of freedom.

Right here, in this room, siblings who had not spoken to each other in years, took the first small step towards reconciliation at a parent's funeral. There are parents and children who cannot forgive each other for hurts and wounds who one day find the courage to pick up the phone, and in that moment, the flicker of peace grows a little brighter.

These are small steps, you could say. But Isaiah says it will happen this way. A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, a branch from his roots. New life will occur where no one thought it possible. You know how sometimes a plant will push through a crack in the sidewalk, and if you had to put money on it, you'd bet it all that the concrete would be stronger than a plant, but one day you see that the plant has made it all the way through, aiming right towards the sunlight.

This is how the world changes. Because there are people who refuse to give up, there are people who believe in the long, slow, hard work of peacemaking because these people want to be close to God.

Every now and then, peace breaks out in a place where we never would have believed it possible. Every once in a while, the deepest, oldest wound you can imagine actually heals. Every now and then, a hatchet gets buried so thoroughly that it is never dug up again, and we have no way of accounting for any of it except to say that it must come from above, Isaiah's vision--the light, the peace, the healing, the calm.

Despite the pain and the loss and the anguish of this world, there is something better coming *for* us, something better coming *from* us, if we will only keep dreaming.

And best of all, *someone* better coming *to* us--if we will only live toward a reality that so far is only promised, but which, in the power and mystery of God, is sure.

A shoot from a dead stump. A smile from a long frozen face. A light that shines in the darkness. A step into a church after years of hurt. A little baby crying in a manger.

It's not much, is it? But it's enough.

Let us pray. Lord, you know all too well that to be human--to be able to feel joy and delight--is also to be able to feel pain and sadness. So come to us all this Advent, O God, bringing glad tidings and good cheer, comfort and hope, for we celebrate that marvelous mystery we call incarnation--when you became one of us, born a baby, who grew up and lived and breathed, seated and cried, ate and drank, lived and died.

Through him, bring us hope, bring us joy, bring us healing and wholeness, bring us a sure refuge in the darkness as we await for something new to be born in us, something small and bright, a tiny flame that will carry us into the future. In the name of that light which sure came to save us, even Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Acknowledgements: sermons by John Holbert and Stephen Montgomery