

## **AN ADVENT MESSAGE OF PEACE**

Psalm 72:1-7  
Isaiah 11:1-10

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Petro was a white-collar professional in Ukraine. Until, that is, the day his office building was bombed and obliterated. Nadia worked in banking. But what really prompted them to want to leave was the fact that their oldest son was about to turn 18, and they feared for his safety. So they fled to Poland, and stayed there several months. While there, Nadia developed a back problem and had to have surgery. Eventually they made their way to the United States and now they live in Parma with their four sons, ages 4, 6, 12 and 18, and with Petro's mother and father.

On Tuesday night we opened the Thrift Shop for them and they selected items they could use - a vacuum cleaner, a lamp, clothing, a chess set, some Christmas decorations, clothing. They have the basics - beds, towels, tables. But none of the extras. I imagine their house feels a little bit more like home this week than it did last week.

After they found what they needed at the shop, a group of us met them here, right out here in the Gathering Space. An interpreter was with them - a delightful young man named Victor who is living in Avon Lake; he's also been in the states about four months. We asked them about their lives back home, about how often they can connect with their relatives, about schooling for their children. It's hard to imagine the profound sense of displacement they feel. Nadia told us that their 6-year-old started school last fall in Ukraine, and now his classmates are scattered around the world.

They are able to speak with their relatives back in Ukraine, but only sporadically and intermittently. They'll receive a message saying, "Call now while we have electricity and service." Nadia's mother told her she has electricity about four hours a day.

There were some tears as she talked about the trauma they've experienced, and the trauma continues because of all that is still ongoing in the country they love, with the people they love. Nadia looked at us and said, "Our four-year-old knows all about Putin." He knows things no four-year-old should know about.

Nadia, Petro and Victor were on my mind and heart all week as I thought about lighting the candle of peace.

What would it feel like to leave your friends and family, not knowing if you would ever see them again? I'm sure it was a hard decision for everyone who left, not only because they were leaving loved ones, but I'll bet it would tug at you...should you stay and fight? Should you stay, just in solidarity? Are you brave to leave? Or are you brave to stay? What a horrific choice they faced. How do you find peace of mind after facing a dilemma like that? PAUSE

How peaceable can any of us feel when we're aware of the war and violence in our world?

Here is a picture of the places in the world where there is currently civil war, terrorist insurgency or armed conflict where at least 1000 people have been killed. We are of course very aware of the war in Ukraine. Other places are not so often in the news.

A civil war has been going on in Yemen since 2014.

We don't think of Mexico as a war-torn nation; in fact many of us have been on vacation there. But Mexico is on the list because of the drug war. The Mexican Drug War is an ongoing conflict between the Mexican government and multiple powerful and violent drug trafficking cartels. It is estimated that the war on drugs has led to at least [350,000 deaths](#)—with more than 72,000 people still missing—from January 2006 to May 2021, and over 5,000 deaths this year.

Our country is, thankfully, not on this list. But I will show one more slide that is more than sobering. This graphic is updated every day. When I sent this slide to Dinah on Friday, it showed 40,754 gun violence deaths in the U.S. As of this morning, the figure had risen to 40,984 - we added over 200 in two days. 299 of those were children, 1,260 were teens.

The prophet Isaiah says that a green shoot will start growing out of a tree stump. I've seen this as I've walked through the woods.

A tree stump is what's left after a tree is cut down, or - if you see it in the woods - what remains after the rest of the tree has fallen or been struck by lightning. In any case, a tree stump is dead, it's not going to produce; there's no life left in it.

Except when there is. A green shoot will sprout from a tree stump. A branch will blossom. In other words, Isaiah says, amazing things are yet to happen in this world, in this life. Don't give up.

Isaiah was writing in the midst of a period of war and violence. He lived through what has been called the first Holocaust of the Jews - their country had been ravaged by its enemy neighbors.

"Even though the world has become a living nightmare," he writes, "even though there is no sign anywhere that peace will ever come, even though human greed and destructiveness are running rampant across our world, hear this: The promise of God is more powerful than the destructiveness of humanity. The wolf *shall* dwell with the lamb; the leopard *shall* lie down with the young goat."

Amazing things are yet to happen in this world, in this life. Don't give up.

More and more I am convinced that the answer, the way forward, is community, relationships, accompaniment. One person has said, and it has been widely quoted, that the role of one human being to another is simply, "To walk each other home."

I don't think I'm alone in this...for me, the problems of the world - whether close to home or far away or all of the above - can feel overwhelming and I am tempted to shut down, distract myself or fall into apathy. What keeps me from despair is the simple question, "What is mine to do?" What is within my sphere of influence? What do I have the capacity to change? Where can I be part of the difference for good?

When I ask myself those questions, I am overwhelmed in a different way. Overwhelmed with gratitude for all we are able to do together through this church community.

Almost twelve years ago, when a group of us went to India to a hospital our church was then sponsoring, I had a long and life-changing conversation with our friend Anil Henry. I said, "I'm so glad to be here, but I really don't bring any skills with me. I don't have any medical expertise. I'm not handy like Dave Witzigreuter. I can't fix anything or build anything." And he said to me, "You don't know what your presence means to us who are here on the front lines. The fact that you were willing to come to

India, to simply be with us, to walk around the hospital with us and see what we're doing - you are partnering with us and the two weeks you spend with us will give us a boost for months to come."

I have thought about that conversation many times as this congregation has continued to expand our ministry and mission and outreach. We are not the only church that is involved in refugee resettlement and that brings meals to the homeless shelter, and the point of this sermon is not to toot our own horn, but I will tell you that we are known in Lorain County. We are the church that provided every Ukrainian refugee a gift card for Christmas. We are putting a roof on the women's sober living facility. We are helping to provide a trailer for the Good Knights bed-building program. I could spend the rest of the morning talking about what we've been able to do together. All of it gives me so much hope. Not only are we making life better for the people served, but think of the people who work in all of these agencies - they are sometimes thankless jobs, stressful and not very well-paid. The fact that we call them and say, "What do you need? How can we help?" ...it helps them feel supported, seen, less alone. Who knows? It may help someone feel motivated to stay in that job a few more months, one more year.

Green shoots grow from stumps. Signs of hope emerge where they are least expected. We get to know people newly arrived from Afghanistan, from Ukraine, we develop empathy as we deliver meals and transport to appointments. We go to bed at night with a sense of peace, knowing we've done what we can, for one day.

When we were sitting in the Gathering Space on Tuesday night, phone numbers were exchanged. One family in our church has a used car which they're gifting to Petro

and Nadia. Marty and Ann Hasenstaub are donating bikes to the family. Our Christmas offering will be used to help this family and others so that we can continue to walk each other home and discover the peace that is more powerful than destructiveness. The answer is relationships, the way forward is accompaniment. In community, we'll walk each other through grief, through devastating diagnoses, through the challenges of parenting. Peace comes when we realize we're not alone. Thanks be to God.