



“Peace in the Face of Pandemonium”

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Next to our garage is a shrub. I don't know what kind of shrub it is. I only know that it is indestructible. I have pruned it back to the ground and it grows back. I have hacked at the main trunk with an axe and it grows back. I have sprayed it with all manner of killer solutions and it grows back. I have had a chain saw taken to it and - you guessed it - it grows back. I have given up. Anything that is that resilient, that irrepressible, that determined deserves to live a long and happy life in peace.

When reading and researching our passage from Isaiah, I was taken by the image of the stump and its shoot. The words in Hebrew are rarely used in scripture. During my travels in Israel, I saw ancient olive trees with new shoots springing from the cracked trunks. A single olive falls into the crack and roots into the ancient wood, producing new fruit. Maybe that's where the image came from for Isaiah.

And we don't really know where to place this passage in history. There are two possibilities. One is that the passage is the response to the end of Syro-Ephraimite War. The other is that this is at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the forced captivity of the leading citizens in Babylon. Frankly, scholars debate this kind of thing all the time. The main point is that some catastrophic event had taken place and the future was uncertain and precarious.

But one thing was unambiguous: despite how desperate things might seem, a new ruler would emerge to guide the people. God had not abandoned the people. God had not forgotten them. God would not leave the people to their own devices.

From the ancient stump of Jesse - David's father - a new shoot would grow.

This new leader would be distinguished by the presence of God's spirit. This would be a person, not motivated by personal enrichment

or an insatiable need for popularity and praise, but a person who would be guided and strengthened by God's own spirit. The heart of this new leader would beat in time with God's own heart. The power of the divine spirit would empower this new ruler to reign and rule.

Isaiah then gives us three pairs of descriptions of this new ruler's nature.

The first is "the spirit of wisdom and understanding." When we see the word "wisdom" used in other biblical contexts, it is used to speak of moral conduct and character. This is a person who will know right from wrong. This is a person who will understand the difference between just and unjust laws and living.

The second is "the spirit of counsel and might." The words could also be translated as "advice and determination" or "strategy and power." The new leader will be well-organized, think and act strategically, and will analyze situations and act accordingly.

The third is "knowledge and fear of the Lord." When we hear that phrase "fear of the Lord," we should think of it in terms of reverence. The new ruler will revere and honor God. The new leader will worship and bow down to God.

The end result? Righteousness. Righteousness grounded in justice. And when righteousness and justice are established, there is peace. And this is not a fragile, partial peace. This peace is so complete and so encompassing that the animals who would naturally be predators and prey will live in harmony and tranquility. All the peoples of the world will be at peace with each other and will seek to improve their knowledge and experience of God.

The passage not only assures the people of a new ruler in the tradition and house of David, it celebrates the ascension of this new ruler to the throne. That's the "near vision" of the passage. That's what the passage meant for the original audience.

If you are ever fortunate enough to visit Chartres Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage site in France, the windows of the cathedral will astound you. One, in particular, shows Jesse, reclined on the ground. Out of his side grows a great tree with notable prophets and leaders near each of the branches. At the top of the tree sits Jesus, interpreting the genealogies of the Matthew and Luke in a quite literal manner.

Nearly since the beginning of the church, Christians have viewed this passage from Isaiah - along with other passages from the prophets - as predictive passages - passages that foretell the messiah. We Christians have taken the prophetic oracles and statements and turned them into Jesus forecasts. In doing so, we remove any meaning for ancient and modern Jews and significantly diminish the possibilities of interpretation.

So, yes, we Christians see the person of Jesus Christ in these words of Isaiah. But they are not for us alone.

The passage teaches us something about the kinds of leaders we should expect and the kind of lives we should live.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips
he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Righteousness...equity...faithfulness. We know when we see these characteristics in a leader and when we don't. And when we are brutally honest, we know when we see them in ourselves and when we don't.

This is what it means to be numbered among God's people:

Righteousness...equity...faithfulness.

God calls those who would be leaders and those who would be led to new lives that are lived in connection to God and each other. God calls those who would be called God's own people to be doers of righteousness and justice, not being swayed by popular opinion or pressures of any kind that would lead away from God's chosen way.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was outside a California prison where Vietnam war protesters were being held on December 14, 1967, he was hardly trying to start a riot. It was there that he said, "There can be no justice without peace and there can be no peace without justice."

When the ways of righteousness and justice are firmly established, there is peace. And without peace there can be no justice. Isaiah gives us the image:

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.

The image is powerful. Ancient enemies are reunited. The predator and the prey are without fear. Infants face no danger. The planet is submerged in the experience of God's presence.

Oh, it can seem like so much "pie in the sky." It has the sound of a fairytale told by men and women in ancient garb from high places to placate the masses. "Preacher," you might say, "don't try to fool me. It will never be like that."

I understand that cynicism. The shadowed world in which we live seems as far removed from Isaiah's vision as it could possibly be. Animosity reigns in the land. Sickness surrounds. Violence is everywhere. Prejudice becomes action. The "peaceable kingdom" of Isaiah's prophecy seems like a lovely little vignette on the pages of a children's book.

But if that vision is ever to have the possibility of becoming reality, it will be because you and I abandoned any form of life that is not grounded in righteousness...equity...faithfulness. If the days when lions and lambs lie down together is ever to come, it will be because we will reject any form of leadership that is not grounded in justice, righteousness, and equity. If the wonder of that world envisioned by the ancient prophet is ever to become reality, it will be only because you and I have repented of any way of past living that does not reflect the light of God's love.

Can there be peace in the face of pandemonium? That is up to each one of us. If we allow the Spirit of the Lord to come over us and indwell us, we will receive the gifts we will need to be people of peace and justice. If we open ourselves to God's presence in our lives, we may receive for ourselves the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and a renewed reverence for God and the things of God.

Perhaps that is the very heart of our Advent preparation. Maybe the changing and renewing of our lives is the best preparation we can offer God and each other. Could it be that we are being given an opportunity to be God's agents of change in the world - to help bring the justice and peace of God to the world in new ways?

Then, like a fresh green shoot springing from a tired, old stump, the world will be awakened to the sure and certain truth that God is not a God of dead ends.

"On that day the root of Jesse shall stand
as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious."

May that day some soon and last forevermore. Amen.