

Dreaming of Peace
Isaiah 11:1–10; Matthew 3:1–12; Romans 15:4–13
Sunday, December 4, 2022 (Advent 2)

Let us pray: Speak to us, Lord, the word that we need to hear to prepare the way in this world and our lives for the coming of Christ. Amen.

It is the second Sunday of Advent, the day on which we light the candle of peace in expectation of the peace that Christ brings to this world. It is *also* the Sunday that we hear about John the Baptist. Every year on this Sunday, we hear John the Baptist out in the wilderness, calling people to repentance, calling them a “brood of vipers,” warning them that the ax is lying at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. He talks about Christ coming with the winnowing fork in his hand, clearing the threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his granary, but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire, presenting us with the question, “Are we wheat or chaff? Are we bearing good fruit or not?” Not exactly an image of *peace*. It’s always a little strange that this is what we get on the second Sunday of Advent.

Ridgley and I have a running joke because the way that the preaching schedule has worked out almost every year that she has been here, she has ended up preaching on the second Sunday of Advent. And earlier this year she said, “Can I *please* not have to preach on John the Baptist this year?!” It was a request that I gladly granted, because *I* actually wanted to preach on John this year. Because a year ago, when I was on medical leave and trying to observe Advent on my own, I noticed something that had never really struck me before. I was reading the story of John the Baptist on this second Sunday, and in both Matthew and Luke’s gospels, Jesus says of John the Baptist, “Among those born of women, *no one* is greater than John.” *Of all the human beings to ever be born*, Jesus says that John is the *greatest*. I would think that makes him

someone we should really want to pay attention to. John actually *does* have something really important to teach us about peace. We'll come back to that in just a little bit.

We are looking this Advent at the dreams of the prophet Isaiah; the ways that Isaiah dreamed of the hope and peace and love and joy that would come with the Messiah. And it reminded me of a story from the Christmas of 1914.

The first World War had been raging for about six months. Over the next four years, over 14 million people would be killed. But on that first Christmas Eve of the war, fighting between German and British troops stopped. The British soldiers in their trenches heard the German soldiers in *their* trenches singing Christmas carols, and so they started singing back. They eventually came out of their trenches and met in the middle, where they shook hands, hugged, sang songs, exchanged cigarettes and wine, they played a game of soccer, and some British troops even set up a makeshift barbershop where they gave German soldiers haircuts. It lasted through Christmas Day. Eventually, by Noon the next day, they were back in their trenches killing each other again. But for that one day, with the coming of Christ, as one British soldier said, "We did not fire that day, and everything was so quiet it seemed like a dream."

That seems *impossible* to us now. Can we imagine that happening in Ukraine today? For at least the past 20 years, we have lived in a world of constant war, where peace seems like it's just a dream.

It was just a dream for Isaiah, too. An impossible hope. Over 700 years before the birth of Christ, the Assyrian army had invaded and conquered the northern part of Israel, leaving the southern part (where Isaiah was) very vulnerable and under the constant threat of attack. They

were living in the shadow of war and violence and destruction and pain and loss. Peace seemed *impossible*.

It was in the midst of *that* that Isaiah envisions a time when “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.”

Despite living in a time of constant war and crisis, Isaiah dreamed of a world in which peace held sway; a world where predator and prey lived together in harmony; a world where enemies were friends. He envisioned this peace being brought about by a *king*, and at the time, they thought it was King Hezekiah. But peace – *real, lasting peace*, the peace of *God* – can never be brought about by a person. If that is where our hope is placed, then our hope is *misplaced*. The peace that Isaiah dreams of is the peace that exists in a world that has been redeemed and renewed and made right by God. Isaiah was dreaming of Christ. He could not have known this, but he *did* know that in the midst of pain and suffering and loss, God’s story was not over. It will not *be* over until all people see the great light of God’s salvation dawning into our world.

We tend to *spiritualize* the peace that Isaiah is talking about. We talk about Christ bringing *inner* peace, *spiritual* peace in the midst of conflict and strife. That when the world is on fire all around us, we can still have *peace*. But Isaiah is not just talking about *animals* here, he is talking about *people*. The peace that Isaiah envisions is *concrete*. It is the cessation of hostility between

people and nations. Are *we* bold enough to dream of *that* kind of peace? Because in our world, *that* kind of peace seems impossible.

There is another reading from the lectionary this week that I went back and forth on whether to have a third scripture reading, but I'll just mention it quickly here because it's really relevant. It's from Paul's letter to the Romans. The church in Rome was composed of both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians who had significant differences and disagreements in their theology and practices. The early church was marked by this conflict between Jews and Gentiles. Peace between them, living together in harmony, seemed impossible. The Jewish Christians said that Gentiles had to become like *them* first, adopting Jewish law and practices before they could really become Christians. That's what we still do today, isn't it? We say, "There can be peace between us, we can live together in harmony, if *you* think and act like *us*."

But Paul says to these Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5–6). He calls on them not just to *put up* with one another or *tolerate* one another, but to *welcome* one another as Christ has welcomed them. He's saying, "Whether you are Jewish or Gentile, Christ has extended grace to you. None of you is *above* the grace of God. So you should extend grace to one another."

How do we do that? How can *we* have *that* kind of peace in the midst of *our* divisions today? Not just *tolerating* one another but *welcoming* and actually *loving* one another. How can *we* live in harmony with one another, glorifying God with one voice? That's where we come back to John the Baptist.

John is in the wilderness calling people to *repent*. He is saying, “The Messiah is coming! We need to prepare the way and get this world and our lives ready for him, and we *do* that by *repenting*.” Repentance is not just *confessing* our sin or feeling *bad* or *guilty* about it. The word *repent* comes from the Hebrew word *shuv*, which means, “to turn.” Repentance is *turning away* from our sin and reorienting our lives to God. Now, what does this have to do with *peace*? Like, if I just repent of my sin, then I will have peace with this person I’m in conflict with? Well, kind of.

You notice that John the Baptist does *not* say, “Go call your enemy to repent of *their* sin.” He does *not* say, “Go point out and condemn the sin of this person you disagree with.” John was calling the people to repent of *their* sins. It says that people came to him to be baptized, confessing *their* sins. We’re really good and pointing out and criticizing and condemning the sins of *others*. But *that* does not lead to *peace*. *That* does not help us live in harmony with one another. *That* is not how we prepare the way of the Lord.

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd talks about how one of the most common things he hears as a preacher is, “You need to preach about *sin* more!” He says that over the years, people have come to him again and again saying, “You preach about love and forgiveness, but you need to preach about *sin* more.” The way he responds to that is by saying, “Yeah, you’re probably right. So tell me your sin, and I’ll preach a sermon about it.” And they say, “That’s not what I meant!” He says, “I *know* that’s not what you meant. And that’s the problem. We like to hear about *other people’s sins* because it makes us feel better about *our own*. If I can focus on *their* sin, I don’t have to think about *my own*. At least I’m not as bad as *them*!”

He talks about the saying, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” That we are supposed to love the *person* even if we don’t agree with what they *do*. But what he says to that is, “Not love the sinner, hate the sin. Love the sinner and hate *your own* sin.” Don’t focus on *their* sin, what *they’re* doing. Focus on *your* sin and what *you* are doing and what you need to be doing *differently*.

Jesus says this same thing. He says, “Don’t worry about the *speck* in your neighbor’s eye. Worry about the *log* in your own.” Because when we do *that*, what we hopefully come to realize is that *I* am a sinner in need of God’s grace and love and forgiveness just as much as I think *you* are. I am no better than you. I am no more righteous than you. If *I* have received the mercy of God, then I *have* to extend that same mercy to others. If *I* have received the grace of God, then I *have* to extend that same grace to others. If I have been *welcomed* by God, then I have to welcome others. *That* is the beginning of *peace* between us – when I stop judging and condemning *you* and humble *myself*.

Where does peace seem impossible to us today? Russia and Ukraine? Israel and Palestine? Racial peace? Political peace between conservatives and liberals? Maybe there’s a situation in your own family where peace seems impossible. Whatever it is, you will not bring about peace by criticizing and condemning *them* or “their side.”

Now, we have to be careful here that we are not telling people who are *oppressed* that they cannot call out the actions of their oppressors. All throughout scripture, God does not stand with the oppressor. God stands with the oppressed, with those who are suffering and crying out for justice. So unless you *are* being oppressed – and I mean *really* oppressed, not the imaginary oppression where we’re just not getting our way – unless you are truly being oppressed, focus on

yourself and *your own* sin; on the ways that *I* have contributed to the problem between us. Humble *yourself*. What needs to change about *me* in order to live in harmony with this other person? Love them, welcome them, focus on your own *stuff*, and trust that they will do the same. If they *don't*, there's nothing you can do about that. But it doesn't change who *you* are called to be.

We live in a time of constant war and conflict, and it seems like peace is impossible. Rev. Carol Prickett says, "It's going to take an act of God to bring peace on earth. And while we believe God *could* and even that God *will*, God doesn't seem to be terribly rushed about it. Usually, though, when I start getting irritated at God, and why God hasn't done something I want done, I find God standing in front of me with a great big mirror." Peace begins by looking not at "them" but at *ourselves*, changing what needs to be changed in *our* lives.

Five hundred years before Jesus, there was a Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu (pronounced *loud-za*) who said,

"If there is to be peace in the world,
 there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
 there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
 there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
 there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
 there must be peace in the heart."

I can't change this other person. But I can open *myself* up to *being* changed. *That* is the first step on the path toward peace. Look at *yourself*. In this world of constant war and conflict, peace *is* a dream. But it is one that *we* are called to dream, in Christ. Amen.