

Isaiah 11:1-11
Dec. 4, 2016

“Peace”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

In the 11th chapter, Isaiah provides a beautiful vision of peace. It's like a dreamland, a utopia... the problem is... this vision of enemies co-existing is nearly beyond our imagination. Natural enemies living together in peace; the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling, all living in peace without shredding each other's hide?... and a little child shall lead them? Dream on John Lennon.

Everything in these verses is working up to this vision. First we hear the promise of a real person, flesh and blood, who will be filled with God's spirit; with divine wisdom and understanding, holy counsel and might, sacred knowledge and respect for the Lord. This person's birth will be the sign of this peaceful kingdom's inauguration. Then we hear about the kind of God who will rule this kingdom; a God who judges with deep discernment. A God guided by deep convictions; judging the poor with righteousness instead of treating them like a strain on society. This ruler will be the one who defines all rulers; using the principal of equity when considering the plight of the meek instead of accepting a dog eat dog world. This is a God of justice, dressed in a belt of righteousness and girded with faithfulness.

The vision looks strange and idealistic to us, it looks... rather *un-natural*. The poor and meek should just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. That's what we all were taught. We learned it so well we thought it was gospel. The reason this vision seems foreign to our sensibilities is we have come to accept a “new” normal in our world. I know it is dangerous to use the word normal for anything these days, but I pray you will bear with me. Isaiah was writing into a time when the people were wrestling in many arenas of life with the meaning of what is “normal.” Among Kings, in the environment, in the economy, in society they faced some of the same struggles as today; the challenge of protecting the most vulnerable and those who are often left voiceless. They lived in a world where tribe was at war with tribe. Corruption and deception, cheating and lying had become the new “normal.”

Isaiah records these prophetic words to say, **“As children of God we have been promised better than this.”** In this advent season, Professor Walter Brueggemann reminds us, “through the song of the promises and the image of the poets, the voice of Moses and of Jesus, a new world is about to be given, and we can trust ourselves to it and live as though we are already in it.”

Isaiah writes these words with the same tone sung in one of the church's favorite hymns, verse three of “This is My Father's World,” says, please pardon my exclusive language, “This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world: why should my heart be sad? The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!” The lyrics are a call to live as residents of peaceful kingdom, even as we are surrounded by sin and evil, hatred and war.

Frederick Buechner, a contemporary Christian Author writes, "Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars. Beggars can't be choosers," he quips. "But in Hebrew peace, Shalom, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself."

Though Jesus is called the Prince of peace we are aware he brings some contradicting views about peace during the few years of his ministry. In Matthew he says, "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." And later on, the last time he eats with his disciples, in John's gospel he says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

Buechner reminds us, "The contradiction is resolved when you realize that for Jesus--peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."

So thank you Isaiah, thank you for reminding us how far we have wandered away from love. Thank you for renewing the vision, albeit strange to our eyes, a vision of the day a wolf shall live with a lamb, a leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and fatling together..." and even a young child, mere property of his or her parents, a commodity in this ancient society, "...a child shall lead the way."

Edward Hays, a Christian author, artist and storyteller says, "Advent is a winter training camp for those who desire peace." So welcome to training camp. The pitchers and catchers aren't reporting early, we are all reporting on day one, today, the second Sunday of Advent 2016, surrounded by this beautiful music, worshipping in this sanctuary adorned with such grace, sitting next to people who hunger and thirst for light and peace as much as you and I do.

Peace may not be the norm in our world. We still live in a time driven far too often by fear, conflict, and ugliness. It is tempting to resolve ourselves and accept this is just the way it is. But Isaiah breaks in with God's prophetic promise, and we seek the strength to live each day with the confidence that God's peace, God's Shalom shall be the norm. And we again devote ourselves to living as though this kingdom were already unfolding. The new norm we claim today is really a very old one... in fact it's the original truth sewn into God's creation. How do we build peace? Through love!

Amen