

Second Sunday of Advent - December 8, 2013

“Seeking Peace in an Unpeaceful World” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah’s vision of the Peaceful World, which is depicted on the cover of your bulletin this week, is magical and fantastic. Wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calves and lions and fattened calf are led by a little child. Cows and bears graze in the same field, their young playing together, while a lion eats with the ox. Children play with cobras and pit vipers, and even grown children stick their hands down the holes of poisonous serpents.

I love this reading. It is perhaps my favorite Advent reading. We know better, though, don’t we?. Predators will always hunt their prey, and prey will always be attentive and primed to flee from attack. Poisonous snakes will always bite those who disturb their calm. Bears and lions will kill easy meat if it is available.

When we lived in Yellowstone Park, we went in one day with a friend of ours. He took us to a hill near sundown. It was a gathering place of wolf-watchers and wildlife photographers. We climbed the hill and watched a strange scene unfold. A bear was feeding on the carcass of a buffalo. It was a second year buffalo, so he wasn’t very big. The mother buffalo stood off to the side and several of the males were kicking the ground nearby. The bear was circling the kill. For a moment it looked like the buffalo were going to attack the bear, until out of the forest on the other side of the plain came three wolves. Now the stand-off was between the wolves and the bear, the bear and the buffalo *and* the wolves and the buffalo. The wolves would occasionally charge a buffalo and chase them down, then come back to the bear. It was a spectacular show of predator and prey, the negotiation between the kill and the need for food, between protection and the projection of force.

There was no peace visible in the scene. By the time we left, there was simply a truce of strong animals wanting to stay alive. That is not peace. Peace in the sense of Scripture is not the absence of war or violence or suffering. Peace in God’s view is something positive, powerful and progressive, in the sense that it spreads to many places and creatures. Peace in God’s view is the end to, if you will allow the analogy, those things which seek to prey upon us and an end to those parts of ourselves that know only fear and running away. Something greater brings together predator and prey and gives them a better reason to live together than an ugly truce of shared strength.

Peace in Isaiah’s vision is troubling, though, because it is not an immediate experience. It is not a global experience. It is not a fast experience. Instead, the peace which arises from God’s work is slow and particular and individual and communal. *“A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”* This is not an immediate result. This is years and years for a branch to grow from a stump to the final outcome of edible fruit. This is slow growth, from underneath, perhaps not even noticed until it is quite far along in its growth.

Another image from our time in Yellowstone National Park is of a tree growing from an impossible place. High up in the steep rock of a mountain a seed fell and, somehow, in the rain and snow and cold and wind, this seed sprouted and found a hold upon the rock surrounding it. Then, it reached roots into the rock and held itself in place and grew, slowly, over time, until it became a survivor in an unsurvivable environment. Small, stunted, but alive and a testament to the power of life to seek out ways of surviving under any condition. This is the way of peace in Isaiah’s vision.

Advent is meant to give us a small experience of the underground, slow, progressive growth of God’s

hope, peace, love and joy into our world, our lives and our communities. It requires something we are not good at: patience, waiting, a taste for the emptiness between breaths. In between the cracks in the rock face of our souls, in between those moments when we want to attack and we want to run away, we wait. And into those in-between places, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear, or awe, of the Lord comes to rest upon us. This is the stump from which God's peace shoots out new growth and new branches.

We do not understand peace as a positive attribute to either ourselves or the world, however. We understand peace as the absence of personal troubles of the mind and body, as the absence of conflict in our families and churches and communities, as the absence of violence and war. What are the positive attributes of peace? How do we define peace according to what it is, rather than what it is not?

In order to find out what peace is rather than what it is not, we have to look to what peace produces. For those fruits, we look to the person of Jesus Christ. When we look at the life of Jesus, we see the positive definition of the nature of peace. Teaching, healing, reconciling, forgiving and loving are all the works of Jesus Christ, and it is in those qualities we find peace. Paul frames his call to positive peace as a prayer, saying, *"5May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,6that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

These are, hopefully, comforting words for all of us. However, you have probably noticed that the readings for Advent are often a little daunting. They are words that call us to account, that ask us to pay attention and wake up. This is because the qualities of hope, peace, love and joy also require something of us. Peace does not just come to us; we have to open ourselves to it, and that can be a painful experience.

And so, John the Baptist steps out of the woods and, in all his strangeness, calls us to repentance. Remember, the word 'repentance' means, in Latin, *"to turn around" or "reverse direction"*. I am certain many of us hear 'repentance' and we hear a call to make less of something - less sin, less of whatever was leading us in a particular direction, less of whoever you are. This is because we often define ourselves by whatever it is God calls us to turn away from. But here is the interesting thing about repentance, and the interesting thing about all the waiting and slowness of Advent: rather than calling us to less, repentance is calling us to more. Repentance allows us to make space for more hope, more peace, more love, more joy.

We want our new life with God and Christ to happen quickly. We want the Jesus baby here now, so we don't have to deal with the waiting and the turning around and all the patience required to get to where God is. The project of forgiveness, love and salvation that God is putting into motion for us through the birth of Jesus, however, is a ground-up operation. And it is slow work. Living in harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, is like a root growing from a stump, a seed seeking stability on the rock face of a mountain. The process, the learning, of the slow growth of God's love and peace in our lives can feel like an axe to the root of all the unproductive trees in our lives. It can feel like being tossed onto the threshing floor by a winnowing fork. The chaff that gets tossed into the unquenchable fire may seem like the things that actually mattered to us rather than things that get in the way of our relationship with God and Christ.

The truth of the matter is, however, that God is making room for more in your life, not less. Out of the stump, out of those places in our lives where it seemed nothing would ever grow again, are the branches that lead to 'perfect harmony' of life with God, a harmony that no longer has room for always attacking or always living in

fear of attack or unstable truces defined by the power to destroy. Isaiah says, “*9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*” This is the peace of the Lord, a peace, as one writer puts it, which “...*would settle over the planet like a velvet coverlet drawn over a sleeping child. The world would recollect itself and discover itself held in the womb of the Mother of God. We would be filled with all the fullness of God, even as we filled the emptiness of the Savior's heart with ours.*” (Loretta Ross-Gotta)

May each of us be held in the peace of God and be filled with the fullness of God. Amen.