

“The Precarious Path to Peace”
Advent II, December 4, 2022
Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

I guess it's no surprise that the Bible talks a lot about peace. And I mean a lot. Years ago I attended a service for world peace held on New Year's Day and a young boy said he had done a survey of the Bible for all the references to peace. He had printed them out on a dot matrix printer with the connected sheets of paper that we used to use. It was a long sheet of references, I don't remember how many pages. Peace is a pretty basic concern in the Bible. God talks about it a lot; prophets talk about it a lot; Jesus talks about it a lot...you get the picture.

What they don't always do, though, is describe what it looks like, or how it's achieved. This passage from Isaiah is one of the few attempts to give a picture of peace and it even offers a way to get there. At least, it offers a means of getting there. Isaiah describes the rise of a leader, a king, who will embody peace—"the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord"—and his presence will be so irresistible that peace will break out spontaneously.

It's a beautiful image. It's been the subject of countless paintings and songs and sermons. But I find it a little hard to swallow. I mean, I understand where it's coming from. You have a society that's struggling, trying to deal with outside pressures from hostile forces, feeling discouraged about their future and wondering how they can possibly survive intact if they're invaded. So, the promise of a leader who will save them and bring them stability and justice and relieve their anxiety forever is a really attractive offer. I understand that. But I just don't think it's realistic. It requires a level of passivity from the population that I really don't think is healthy and, as the history of the world we live in has taught us, can be very dangerous.

Putting your trust in an individual, giving that person unlimited power to make the rules and mete out justice has never led to good outcomes. And understand, the writer of Isaiah, within his historical context, didn't anticipate the emergence of a sort of quasi-divine person taking over. Christians have identified Isaiah's words with Jesus, but Isaiah didn't have a figure like Jesus in mind. He was hoping for a king who would be like the idealized image of David. Not a messiah so much as a hero. But in our experience heroes have feet of clay, and if the whole system is dependent on them, then it's not likely to last.

The peace Isaiah describes, what it looks like, is something worth striving for. In commenting on this passage, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out how a biblical understanding of government, "must attend to issues of economic justice for the vulnerable. This 'theory of government' is not primarily concerned to create free space for 'the working of the market' in the hands of the powerful or for the policing of personal morality, but for the maintenance of economic viability for all members of society." A world where everyone has access to what they need to live with security and health is a world worth building. But

Isaiah envisions it being imposed from the top down through a charismatic leader. I don't think societies like that ever really last.

That call to wait for someone to come fix things for us is one element of the season of Advent I find hard to accept. I like the vision of peace Isaiah offers, just not the path to get there. That's why I appreciate the entrance of John the Baptist on the scene. John isn't interested in a passive spirituality. He goes out into the desert and calls people away from their homes and the marketplace and insists they turn their backs on all the old ways of living if they want to find real peace. It is a powerful movement he's launching out in the wilderness.

And when you look at this scene, all the people clamoring to respond, you realize he has touched a nerve in his society that needs to be stimulated. He's calling them to take control. Repentance isn't the abject groveling we tend to imagine, just lying on the floor saying how sorry we are. Repentance is actively changing our behavior to walk on a new and righteous path. That's why he's so skeptical of the Sadducees and Pharisees who come for baptism. John's not convinced they are really committed to walking a new path. They're deeply entrenched in the status quo. He finds it very hard to believe they're willing to do what's necessary to repent. He sounds pretty harsh toward them, but they need to be shaken up. He's not out there for kicks. And people who are just going through the motions are wasting his time and theirs.

John probably imagines that peace will look the same as Isaiah does, but he envisions the path to it from the bottom up. That seems much more realistic to me, even though it's a lot more precarious. Peace depends on the likes of people like you...and me, people who are flawed and erratic and easily distracted; it depends on people who are broken and often deeply hurt. Making the decision to repent, entering those waters of new life, demands something profound of us. We have to reach deep into ourselves and see ourselves honestly.

When we do that we discover change is needed if we want to find our way to peace. There are personal changes we have to make. We need to turn away from certain priorities that drive our behavior, our desire to preserve our status and privilege, for instance. Lately a number of sociologists have noticed a rise in something called "white Christian nationalism." Now, that may sound like a branch of Christianity, but really it's a political ideology that wants to establish a white ethno-state and declare our country a Christian nation. Its followers are characterized by their belief that white people, especially white Christians, are discriminated against in our country. A large majority of them also believe that turning to violence to preserve their status is legitimate.

I don't know where that kind of delusional thinking comes from, but it's real. And people committed to peace are called to reject it. Repentance includes looking closely at those kinds of beliefs and recognizing our failure to speak out against them. And then take the risky step of opposing them. What John is inviting people to do is to stand up against the forces in their society that undermine God's justice. Simply coming out to the Jordan to be baptized was a

subversive act. So, in addition to changing our personal behavior, we're called on to set things in motion to change society as a whole, to make a straight path for God's kingdom to arrive.

But it can't happen without our cooperation. Even though John describes the One coming after him with a winnowing fork in his hand, separating the chaff from the wheat, if no one's listening, if no one's willing to risk walking Jesus' precarious path, then what difference will his arrival make? We have a chance, every day, to prepare ourselves. Repentance is always available to us and changing our course is always an option. The question is are we willing to take that risk? Are we willing to turn our backs on lives of privilege and status built on a system that leaves so many others behind so something new can be created; so peace, real peace, the wholeness and harmony God intends for us, can have a chance? That's what Isaiah was encouraging his people to dream of and John was calling his people to pursue.

The kingdom of heaven is near. It's up to you and me to reach out and pull it in. It's up to you and me to make the path straight and prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen