

“Gifts of the Messiah: Peace”

Isaiah 11:1-9

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2023

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James McAuley wrote a poem in which he describes a storm, a gathering storm, with the clouds changing hues and colors. The poem depicts him as a young boy who says to his mother as the clouds change and the wind is blustering, “You’d think the ending of the world had come.” The poem concludes with these words:

By nightfall things had their familiar look.
But I had seen the world stand in dismay
Under the aspect of another meaning
That rain or time would hardly wash away.

Yes, the storm passed, and the world was back to the way it used to look, but he had now seen the world “under the aspect of another meaning.”

I wonder if the season of Advent can be like that, a way of looking at the world under the aspect of another meaning. The world leads us to see things in certain ways, but then along comes the biblical story, a story of light shining in darkness and hope renewed, and things do look differently. Don’t we need a story now that will help us to live under the aspect of another meaning?

I told a friend the other day that I can’t pick up the paper anymore without wanting to cry. Hamas committed a horrible atrocity against the citizens of Israel. Israel responded, and over 15,000 Palestinians, including many children, have died because of Israel’s incursion into Gaza. Israel had to respond to the horror inflicted against its people, but I can’t help asking, “To this extent? Was there another way?” And the international scene doesn’t have a monopoly on violence. Anti-semitism is on the rise in our country, and Jews are attacked. Three American Palestinian college students were shot by a crazed man in Vermont. Are you beginning to think something isn’t right in the world? In our own country politicians regularly use the language of violence to demean their opponents and to dehumanize them. Gunshots echo on the streets of our communities. Families fight. Domestic violence is exposed.

Conflict is not only out there; it’s also inside of us. There are times we explode with anger, and there are times we act like the victims, and fail to assert ourselves. In each of us there is a struggle to be one or the other. We need peace in our lives, with others, and in the world, but first we need a story.

The prophet Isaiah sees the need for peace also. He has been struggling with four successive kings of Judah to encourage them to trust God. The latest king Ahaz exasperates him. The king is worried that his kingdom will be devoured by the nations around him as a wolf would devour a lamb. “You have nothing to fear, but fear itself,” Isaiah tells him, “God will be with you, and these threats will disappear. The city, the Temple where God dwells will not be assaulted.” But the king doesn’t trust God’s ways. I can imagine Ahaz saying to Isaiah, “Leave me alone, you meddling preacher! You live in your fantasies of God. I live in the real world where deals have to be made. This is the story under which I live. REALITY! Be gone, prophet!” Ahaz dismisses Isaiah and turns to Assyria, the violent superpower of his day, and cuts his deal.

It's enough to drive the prophet to despair. We all know that feeling too. The real world – the world of violence and power politics, the world of strife without and conflict within – can lead to a collapse of hope and the pit of despair. But God will not leave the prophet in such hopelessness, and neither will God abandon us. God grants Isaiah the vision of a new king. A young king, like a shoot of new growth, will arise from this dead stump of Jesse, this dynasty of failed kings, and this new king will be faithful to God. Upon this king, God's spirit will fall, and he will turn the world upside down. This king will have such wisdom that he will judge, but not in the way earthly courts do. He will judge with righteousness and with an intent to assist the poor.

And then Isaiah's vision unfolds even more deeply. When this king rules, peace and harmony will be the new reality. In jarring images from nature reversed, he depicts a world in which prey and predator dwell together in harmony. The wolf shall live with the lamb. The calf and the lion will hang out together. Children will play with snakes and lead the whole parade. And when does this all happen? When the earth is full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.

I have trouble believing this. Comedian Woody Allen once quipped that when the wolf and the lamb lie down together, the lamb will not get much sleep. Carnivores and predators have to eat. Survival depends on it. Was Isaiah so naïve as to believe that animals could change their nature? I think Isaiah was saying that there is one animal who can change its nature: the human animal. We can make the choice of which story will give us meaning and a purpose to live for. The story of violence upon violence or the story of peace?

The 19th century painter Edward Hicks chose Isaiah 11 to be his story. His famous painting, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which graces the cover of our bulletin this morning, depicts Isaiah's vision of peace in nature. The carnivores in the picture have this stunned, wide-eyed look on their faces as if they were thinking, "What do you mean? I don't get to eat lamb chops anymore!" If you turn to the left side of the picture, you see William Penn drafting a treaty with Native Americans. It's as if Hicks is saying that if we live with the vision of a peaceable kingdom, then there is hope that we can build peace in our time and in our lives.

Isaiah lived under this story, but of course in his life, the king he longed for did not come. But the hope for Messiah and his peace never died. As Christians, we believe that hope was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This peaceable kingdom was born on Christmas in Jesus, who taught us to love, who blessed peacemakers, who taught us that God is good, who died on the cross to unite us to God forever, and who was raised from the dead victorious over the power of evil and sin, warfare and violence. God achieved something glorious in Jesus, or as the Psalmist has said: "[God] alone does wondrous things."

And yet ... we're still waiting for that peaceable kingdom to arrive in its fullness. "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!" we pray. Until that day we pray and work to make the world look a little little more like Jesus. Sometimes we get things right, and sometimes we get them wrong. Sometimes we are worn down by life and circumstances, and sometimes we find ourselves emboldened and encouraged by the struggle which can bring us joy and a new beginning. Our hope for a peaceful world is not based on what we achieve or fail to achieve. Our hope is in God who has promised to take care of everything, our failures and our stumblings too. The story we tell matters.

A few years ago a prominent African-American pastor served a large church in Harlem. From the church's Gothic spire, you could see the surrounding neighborhood, and it looked like a war

zone: burned out buildings, seedy pawn shops, roach infested stores, prostitutes up and down the street, crack dealers in abundance. A lot of churches had pulled up stakes and moved away, but this congregation had stayed. They set up after school programs, a neighborhood development agency, Bible studies in apartment buildings, but it still, well, it just didn't look like anything was happening. A reporter asked the pastor, "You're doing great stuff, but it's hard to see what difference any of it is making. What enables you and your people to keep going?" The pastor said, "Well, we've read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet, but we know how it ends, and that's what makes the difference."

We know how the story ends. The world will end in peace and justice for all, and so we work now for that world, because we know how everything ends. We know that death will not have the final word. And so now we comfort and wipe the tears from grieving eyes because we know how it ends: "See the home of God is among mortals," says the Book of Revelation, "[God] will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21: 3-4) We know how it ends.

We know in the that coming kingdom peace will reign. And so now we mend relationships. We forgive those now who have hurt us, and we repent for the hurts we have done unto others because in the kingdom to come we will no longer be alienated and strangers to one another. We know how it ends. We know in God's peaceable kingdom that war and violence will cease, that swords will be beaten into plowshares, that instruments of war will be transfigured into tools of prosperity. And because of that we practice peaceful ways and support those causes that will end war. I long for that day, for the day when all of our disagreements will be lost in the abyss of God's love, and everything will turn out all right. I long for the liberation of my own spirit and yours, when we can love beyond our agendas and our petty judgments about people. Because that is how it will end when the Messiah comes.

And so, we live now with hope in our hearts because of this story that invites us to live under the aspect of a new meaning. Pray for that gift this Advent season, and practice peace by living towards that day when God will bring healing and peace to all. Let us pray: O Peace of God, incarnation of justice and equity, come and teach us the ways of peace. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.