

“Peace Can’t Wait”
Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

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What can’t wait? In this season of anticipation, waiting, and preparing, what can’t wait? Last Sunday we reflected on needing hope in our world right now, not being able to wait for hope any longer. We named hope as transformative resistance of despair. And now, at the beginning of the second week of Advent, we turn to Peace. I’m not talking about the peace that comes when you are all alone and checked out from the world around you or peace as the absence of emotion, whether those emotions be painful or pleasurable.

This is an active peace that is grounded in the Christmas story. At Christmastime God subverts the idea that “the world will be better one day, far off, somewhere beyond this time and place,” and instills in us a sense of possibility for the time right now by coming down to earth and sojourning alongside humanity. That taught us that God’s business doesn’t happen somewhere else, it happens right here. Right now. When Jesus was born and eventually began his ministry, he did not preach, “One day you shall love your neighbors.” He said, “Love your neighbors. Right now. Love God. Right now. Love yourself. Right now.”

And so peace in relationship to this Christmas story is an active peace. This peace is the act of turning away from fear and toward God. Fear manifests in our world through scarcity, through greed, through compromising the care of all for the safety of a few. Peace is what happens when we turn away from those fears and instead trust that God is transforming the world around us and moving us toward the relationships and resources we need to thrive.

So even though peace gets talked about as this stillness or pause in the chaos of the world, it is actually an action - a turning away from the chaos and toward God's love, a shift from fear toward a Spirit that is life-giving and life-sustaining.

The scripture from Isaiah begins with the image of a shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse. To understand this passage, we first need to imagine a family tree. On a family tree, we see branches of descendants, each new generation growing from the last, extending upward and outward, recording marriages and births and deaths, but also recording a family legacy, stories growing out of stories, a generational record of the way they impacted the world.

In the Hebrew Bible, there was one family tree that was followed for generations and not only shaped the members of that family, but shaped the future of the Hebrew people. This family was believed to be the carriers of God's goodness and righteousness, the spiritual rulers who helped connect all other people to God and who interpreted the way God wanted them to live. This deeply important family begins with Abraham, which is why we have the song, "Father Abraham, had many kids, many kids had father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord...Right arm..." Abraham began a legacy of over ten generations of leaders serving God and leading God's people, all the way to a man named Jesse, grandson of Ruth and Boaz.

Something changed when they got to Jesse's generation. The family's legacy was thwarted by either another empire or exile - scholars aren't exactly sure - but what they know is that suddenly all the trust that had been placed on this one family and their leadership disappears. There is uncertainty about the Hebrew people's future. There is fear about what will happen to them and who will lead them. The people feel like they are walking through a fog with no clear

direction. This is the stump of Jesse. Not a family tree with strong branches swaying ahead, but a stump, cut off and lifeless.

The image of reassuring peace that Isaiah describes is a shoot coming out of the stump, a branch that continues to grow. A family tree that still has life in it, a future that is still being written. A message that God is not yet done. The prophet Isaiah tells his people that this family will continue and the next generation will be wise and understanding, will know God intimately and will follow God's will. Isaiah says this next generation will govern with equity for all people, especially the poor, and that wickedness will be wiped out, righteousness will reign.

And then Isaiah paints the now famous image of a wolf living with a lamb, a leopard lying down with a baby goat. Animals that were once predator and prey living together peaceably, and a little child leading them. An image that turns upside down what we thought we knew about enemies and unions, about who is qualified to lead and what leadership looks like. When Isaiah shared this image with the people who were filled with fear for their future, they turned away from that fear and back toward trusting God, they were filled with the kind of peace that comes when you might be uncertain how things will unfold or what will happen, but you trust that God is working and weaving together our futures in a way that points us toward love and justice.

A shoot emerges out of the stump of Jesse, a fresh branch grows in a place that was once feared to be lifeless. In this story, Jesse goes on to have a son, David, who grew up to become King David, the greatest king in the history of the Israelite people, a strong and beloved ruler. This passage from Isaiah was passed down through the generations to come as a reminder to trust God and to turn away from fear and toward peace.

Many, many, many, years later early Christians would eventually inherit this same scripture passage and interpret it anew, tracing that same family tree from Jesse to David, all the way to Jesus, filling with peace once more as they understood that God was still working in the world to bring about justice for all people.

Today we are still a people that are called to peace - to turn away from fear, to turn away from scarcity, to turn toward God and the trust that God is working in our world to bring about love and justice. Being a people of peace is about constantly reorienting ourselves, daring to be in motion and move against the tide of negativity, doubts, fear, and heartaches that threaten to overwhelm us. To instead claim that through God each one of us has a future where thriving is possible, where hope is restored, where love is known, and where justice reigns.

Because peace is active, like the prophet Isaiah proclaimed for his people, we are still in need of peacemakers who remind us that we are called to this do this work, and who demonstrate what peacemaking looks like in our world. Peacemakers are not meek, passive, individuals who sit on the sidelines and pray that everything will get sorted in its own time. Peacemakers are people who show up and remind others what we are called to move toward and remind the rest of us that God is still at work.

John the Baptist was a peacemaker in his time. And if you ever wanted an example of what kind of oddballs, misfits, and passion-driven folks are called to this prophetic work, look no further than John the Baptist. John clothed himself in camel's hair, bound together with a leather belt. John's idea of fine dining was locusts and wild honey. We hear these descriptions because we are supposed to understand that not only was John different, but he stuck out from the crowd.

Instead of cajoling or soothing people, John was prone to shouting at them, startling them out of their comfort and away from their fears - startling them into a new way of living. John had

a message of repentance. In Hebrew, repentance comes from the word that means, “to turn.” So John is shouting at everyone around him telling them to turn, away from evil and toward Love! God’s time has come, so turn away from the things that keep you separate from God! Prepare to live in God’s way. John’s words must have been startling, maybe even alarming, but those who listened surely followed, seeking peace by turning toward the life offered by God, by turning toward their faith.

Today I don’t know any peacemakers who wear camel hair or who wish we served locusts and wild honey at coffee hour, but I know a lot of peacemakers. I know people who remind us that God is still writing our story and that we are called to be participants in the unfolding of love and justice in our world. There were peacemakers among us today who snuck out of worship with our children, peacemakers who are grounding our young ones in God’s love and are teaching our youth to tap into their powerful leadership skills to spread that love beyond our church walls.

There were peacemakers at the state capital on Friday afternoon and around the country, standing up for climate justice, proclaiming that we need to turn away from greed and consumerism and turn toward God’s nurturing care of all creation, turn toward sustainability in relationship with the land on which we reside.

Every time I see a student or professional athlete kneel during the national anthem, I know I am witnessing a peacemaker at work, someone who has the courage to tell us to turn away from racism and a legacy of exploitation of black and brown bodies, to turn toward equity for all people.

I see peacemakers when people come together to share resources with one another, to feed their neighbors, to make sure that not one person goes without what they need. These

peacemakers remind us to turn away from the idea that some people are more deserving than others, or that it is necessary to earn that which we all have a right to: clean water, fresh food, shelter, safety.

There are peacemakers among us, hard at work reorienting us toward God and God's kingdom on earth. Peacemakers who are shoots growing out of stumps, fresh branches emerging in places we once feared were devoid of life.

This week of Advent, this week of peace, is about changing direction. I would ask each of us today, what is one part of your life where you would like to reorient yourself? One aspect of your time you would like to use differently, one activity or practice you would like to renew or take up for the first time, or perhaps give up. Or maybe one relationship you would like to tend to? What in your life is in need of peace? How might you turn away from whatever has been controlling that thing and turn toward God, allowing the Holy Spirit of love, justice, and reconciliation to ground you? How might peacemaking help you reorient yourself?

And then because we are here together as a church congregation, as a united community, I ask the same thing of us collectively. What is one part of the church where we might be called to repent? To turn and reorient ourselves? What is one way we need peacemakers to remind us of God's call for us and to help us live into that call? Once you have that idea in mind, how might **you** be called to be a peacemaker in our community?

Peacemaking is a task for each one of us, in our personal and communal lives. It is for oddballs, misfits, hesitant questioners, and enthusiastic volunteers. It is for anyone who is willing to turn away from fear and toward God's love. To turn away from that which separates us and turn toward unity. Any who is willing to reorient toward God's vision for this world, in our Advent season and beyond. We need you, courageous peacemakers. We need you, visionaries

and architects. We need you, engineers and caretakers. We need you, teachers and elders and youth and activists and anyone who is willing to guide us toward God's love. There is so much on the line, so much at stake in our world and for our future. It is time for us to reclaim our call as peacemakers, because peace can't wait.