

Pastor's Message – 12/4/2022

Isaiah 11:1-10

Lately, because of our Sunday Bible readings, we've been reflecting on dreams and visions: on visions of utopia or Shangri-La, heaven or paradise. Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 11:1-10, our Bible passage for today, comes from a time that was anything but utopian. The tiny kingdom of Judah, established as it was on ancient eastern trading routes, was always under threat from whichever surrounding power was on the rise. Isaiah lived at a time when Judah was under imminent threat from the growing might of the Assyrian Empire, Isaiah viewed the great empire of Assyria, which had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and came right to the gates of Jerusalem, as God's instrument against faithless people.

Isaiah saw a world of predators and victims. Not much has changed. Today's world is still a world of predators and victims; it still seems to be a dog-eat-dog world. The names have changed, but today there are still wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, lions and calves. There are still snakes that threaten not only our children but us as well.

We know that war continues in Ukraine. Heretofore unknown public protests are being squelched in Iran and China even as they continue. In our own country, it seems that we hear of mass shootings almost every week. Political divisions continue to make the news. Families, thrust together for the holidays, dredge up slights and hurts, sometimes, from long ago.

The world is filled with tensions and conflict. For thousands of years, governments, charities, companies, and individuals have thrown bags of money, well-armed soldiers, and brilliant diplomats at our global social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial issues. We've deposed fascists and dictators. We've tried solving our injustices and inequities with research and development. We've invented vaccine programs, mounted public health campaigns, built wells, fed starving nations, increased literacy, ended slavery (for the most part), improved communication and transportation and done a lot of good in many other areas.

Sure, we can say we've had a measure of success, but still, huge inequities and injustices remain. It's still a dangerous planet. Lions still stalk us. The poor are still hungry and oppressed. Wolves, big and small, devour the weak. Entire nations live in poverty. Millions and millions of children remain at risk from war, sickness, and hunger. There are snakes in the grass. Our solutions just aren't big enough, or clever enough, to solve all the underlying problems.

What is now was then, according to Isaiah. Isaiah saw that the earth was suffering terribly — as it was then, so it is now. The poor were judged unfairly. The wicked and powerful took the upper hand. Growling killers were hunting the weak; hungry marauders were prowling at the doors of the oppressed; greedy predators were taking whatever they wanted. The lambs, the kids, the fatlings, and the little children of the world were vulnerable, always in danger, always threatened, and always at risk. No global solution was visible.

Isaiah wanted answers and God answered Isaiah. The answer is in today's reading, and it's in the gospels. The answer is Jesus, the Messiah — the one whose birth we'll soon celebrate. God's response to Isaiah is the highest, best, and only permanent solution to the world's ongoing and terribly vexing problems.

God's solution is simple, it's inexpensive, it's readily available, and it's staring us right in the face, in black and white; not only that, but it can also be written on our hearts, too. We will not find hope in human measures. Isaiah promises that hope is found in God sending a Messiah: a shoot from the stump of Jesse. Isaiah proclaims that a shoot will come from what seems to be the dead tree stump — a leader on whom God's spirit will rest.

Isaiah's prophecy of the peaceful kingdom is front and center in our collective consciousness at this time of the year. Everywhere we go, decorations, ornaments, carols, and cards shout the words "Peace on Earth!" During Advent, this time of preparation before Christmas, everyone, church and unchurch alike, has been given a "free pass" to openly and boldly proclaim the dream of peace.

The dream of peace is the single thread that connects us to every community, in every country, in every time and place throughout history. Peace is a core value of our human condition. In some parts of the world, peace would mean a ceasefire. In other places, peace might be a setting aside of personal differences. The lion and the lamb may look different in different places, but the vision remains one of peaceful co-existence.

As people who proclaim a faith in the One whom we know as the Prince of Peace, our churches play a key role in keeping the dream of God's peace alive. In a unique and glorious way, we are ambassadors of hope, protectors of promise, and holy dreamers of the ultimate dream.

Isn't that essentially what we celebrate in worship — that instinctive involuntary recognition that "This is how things should be?" We gather up those best times, and we act them out to say, "This must be what life with God is like." We gather around the Lord's Table — people from different experiences and backgrounds and opinions and viewpoints, people of

different ages and put aside those differences to celebrate one God common to us all and God's vision of peace among all peoples.

That was the original intent of Isaiah's prophecy. He prophesied about the stump of Jesse: the line of David that had failed and died out. He promised that God would send a king who would carry a spirit, not the Holy Spirit, but a spirit that was a force to enliven and give power, energy, and courage. This new king would bring justice for the poor and offer hope to people in crisis. The image of peace would prevail, and a new creation would be born wherein the impossible was not just possible but reality.

This new leader will preside over fundamental changes to the violent cultures of the earth, including the beasts of the wilderness. This coming age will be so peaceful that even the most vulnerable of children, those still being breastfed, will be able to wander the wilderness as safe as if nestled in a mother's arms. A child will lead in this new reign of God, moving all to act on behalf of what is just.

But beware of those who want to define reality for you. Beware of those who try to tell you what is or isn't realistic. Beware of the one who tells you this is as good as it gets and anyone who believes that life holds more than suffering and hardship is unrealistic. Beware of the one who says that only the naïve and the stupid could believe that there could be economic recovery with higher priorities given to hospitals and schools than casinos and sports stadiums.

If someone else is trying to define the limits of reality for you, ask what it is they have invested in the present reality. Why would they be threatened if we believed that something was possible that isn't yet in place? Why do the forest industries tell us that investing in timber plantations instead of old growth forests is unrealistic? Why do the arms manufacturers tell us it's unrealistic to talk of loving your enemies? Why do those invested in oil believe that corners have to be cut and there is no risk to rivers and streams and water supplies and the Arctic?

Sometimes the difficulties we have embracing a new vision of reality are not external. They're not always somebody else with a vested interest. Some of the demons are within us. Often, we are just resigning ourselves to the inevitability of unchanging cycles. We have heard so often that history repeats itself and that the more things change the more they stay the same. We take it for granted that the way things are is pretty much the only way they can be. Our experience of the world determines the limits of our vision.

I've never seen a leopard change its spots, therefore it can't. I've never seen the lion lay down with the lamb, therefore it couldn't happen. I've never known someone you could trust, therefore there isn't anyone. I've never been

able to change this pattern in my life before, therefore I never will.

We end up as our own worst enemies with a mixture of fear and lack of vision conspiring from within us to hold us in the prison of our present circumstances. The voices whisper away within us. Every time you've tried to get out of this before you've failed. Don't risk being a failure again. You can dream your dreams, but they're only dreams. You always have to go back to reality when you wake up. Back to the real world where nothing ever changes.

God's coming reign may be very different from what we are expecting, turning upside down some of our cherished beliefs and traditions. But if we look around, where do we see evidence of that vision becoming reality? Where is the child putting his hand? Over the hole of the asp, into the den of the adder. Peace is already visible in our world.

There is a take-away message for us today in the Bible passage from Isaiah. This text points to a millennial experience when: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD - - and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." (11:2-5).

That is the take-away message for today. *If this is God's vision of the future, then that is the vision which we are called upon to work for today.*

Everywhere, every time, peace is lived out everywhere, every time, the needy are cared for everywhere, every time enemies come together, the spirit of the LORD is present, and God's kingdom of peace has come.

It is already here, and we can help it grow. This Christmas, I challenge you to take a Christmas Pledge, believing in the true spirit of Christmas, by committing yourself to:

- Remembering those people who truly need your gifts;
- Expressing your love in more direct ways than gifts;
- Examining your holiday activities in the light of your deepest values;
- Being a peacemaker within your own circle of family and friends; and
- Rededicating yourself to spiritual growth and coming closer to Jesus.

Isaiah gives us a vision: a vision of what the world will look like when we truly follow God's intention and desire for God's creation and knowledge of God fills the earth. Embracing that vision, believing in that vision, and then acting as if you believe it by speaking words of hope, positive and encouraging words, brings the vision into reality.