

A Vision of Peace

Isaiah 11:1-9

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The world this week mourned the death of Nelson Mandela, who went from political prisoner to President of South Africa, and led that nation out of decades of enforced segregation – called “apartheid” – into the status as the most successful and prosperous nation in Africa. I am not familiar with his religious background or convictions, but I do know that he was a determined opponent of injustice and was just as determined to be a peaceful opponent of injustice. After apartheid was officially dismantled, Mandela and the Methodist Bishop Desmond Tutu were among the leaders of the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, which enabled those who had been perpetrators of injustice and those who had committed crimes in opposition and those whose convictions on both sides were deep and intense to be reconciled, and live in peace. In the terminology of this passage from Isaiah, it was a lot like the wolf living with the lamb. It seemed to be an impossible vision, but it became reality. Nobody will claim things are perfect there, but when you see people of different races now free to simply be friends... well, that’s remarkable. It is a glimpse of real peace, which is rare among us, who seem more inclined to self-centeredness than self-sacrifice and more prone to conflict than reconciliation. These are small glimmers of hope, set against the image given us through Isaiah for the completion of peace. That vision of peace is not some warm fuzzy, distant, untouchable dream – it is the reality of life under the Lordship of God. That is what this message from Isaiah is all about: peace is not just a wish – it is God’s promise, and God’s promises never fail.

The original audience for this message from Isaiah would have easily connected to the desire for peace. The exact timing is uncertain, but it comes from the general time of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians and conquest – or at least the threat of it – of the Southern Kingdom by the Babylonians. In verse 1 of this passage, the prophet refers to the “stump of Jesse” as the starting point for the

promised restoration and peace. Jesse was the father of King David, and the reference to the “stump of Jesse” is an easily recognized reminder to these people of how far they had fallen in stature, power, and relationship with God from the heights they had enjoyed in the time of David and Solomon. The prophets – not just Isaiah, but the whole list of the prophets to both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms – all recognized that God would always have a remnant of faithful people to rebuild upon when the rest wandered off. Here Isaiah uses the image of the stump and roots to show that while the nation was a long way from being a whole tree, the foundation for restoration of the people to right relationship with God would be there.

Restoration can also be seen underlying the scene painted for us in verses 6-9. This condition recalls for us the Garden of Eden, where before the sin of man broke the peace, animals that we know only in terms of prey and predator lived in peace with each other. The imagery can easily be extended to humans, whether as individuals or groups or nations. We began in peace under the reign of God, but we followed our own path and disintegrated into war and conflict. Here, in a place where peace is rarely known, we are shown the promise of true peace. It is a beautiful picture.

The original hearers of this message would have first been thinking about all this in terms of rescue and restoration from the forces that physically threatened them. But later on, people would come to understand these messages as describing the reign God signified by the coming of the Messiah. The early church would have understood very clearly that Jesus began the fulfillment of that promise, because they had known the Messiah as the Prince of Peace, coming into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a great war-horse. But even as they understood and appreciated that, they would have known from their own experience that the vision of peace described by Isaiah was not realized for the world in this coming of the Messiah because the world had rejected Him. We read passages about the nature of true peace like this one from Isaiah 11, and it is painfully obvious that the conditions of righteousness, justice, and peace that are described there do not exist in our time either. We have to know from our own

experience that the full realization of the peace for the whole world described by Isaiah awaits the second coming of Christ. Our Advent preparation should clearly include the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, but it has to include joyful expectation of His coming again. In that time, in that world, righteousness, justice, and peace will exist, and we anticipate that time.

But what about now; what about this life? What about our need for peace now? This message is not just about a future reality for the world – it is about the potential for a present reality that can be for us now – that can be for people living now in right relationship with God. He is not just showing us something for some unknown time in the future, the prophet is showing us what can be now if we repent and return and respond to God. He is showing us that we can live in the peace of God, now.

Isaiah illustrates for us several characteristics of this peace, and he begins with the characteristics of the leader. For us to get the application of this to our lives, we need to put ourselves here, not as the leader or ruler of the nation, but as the person in charge of our own circle of influence, no matter how large or small that circle might be. The circle may initially include only ourselves, or our family. What we are talking about here first is the establishment of true peace in our own circle. We can expand that circle of influence later, but we have to start somewhere.

What does Isaiah see in the character of a person leading his circle into true peace?

First, he sees a leader who is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and who knows that the Holy Spirit is the source of whatever wisdom, power, understanding, and knowledge that he has. This person does not rely on his own resources, but calls upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction and strength.

We live in a culture that tells us to look within ourselves for wisdom and truth. They are not there. If all we bring to the table is the stuff that we have come up with on our own, out of our own imaginations or whatever, we are in serious trouble. We do not have and we will never have what is necessary to overcome the forces of sin

and darkness the drive us away from peace and into war and conflict with each other. It takes God to do that.

Second, Isaiah sees a leader who is motivated by “fear of the Lord”. That does not mean a person who does what he does to keep God from having him struck by lightning. It means a person whose decision making is ordered by understanding of God’s standards, who knows that he has the freedom to choose ways that are not God’s ways, but that God’s ways are always the best. He also knows that disobedience of God will have negative consequences. The leader to peace is motivated to obedience by the love of God – by an attitude of one-ness with God that is born out of God’s grace.

Third, Isaiah sees a leader who treats others with fairness, justice, and mercy – no matter whether those others are rich or poor, weak or powerful. He has a heart for the lost; a special feeling for the oppressed or disadvantaged. The model for this is seen most clearly in Jesus, who had boundless compassion for the sick and weak and humble – and who reserved His sharpest words for the corrupt, those who abused their power and authority to benefit themselves at the expense of others.

Finally, Isaiah sees a leader who is decisive and determined in opposing evil. This would not be a person who tolerates evil to avoid offending somebody, or who is unwilling to stand up for what is right. Neither does it mean a person who is judgmental and merciless. It means a person who identifies and confronts evil with grace and mercy and forgiveness and the love of God.

That leadership will create the conditions for restoration of the peace of Eden, which is also the peace of the new heaven and new earth following Christ’s coming again. There’s a big picture here, and it is a beautiful promise of God. It is a future certainty. But we should not overlook the promise of peace in our present reality if we are governed by the Holy Spirit, motivated by obedience to God, and unswerving in our commitment to justice in our relationships with each other. It is a promise of

peace now that follows the instructions from the prophet Micah to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

It would be easy for us contrast the beauty of the true peace described here against the comparatively dismal condition of our world and just give up – as individuals, and a nation, as Christians. I’m sure there were people in Jerusalem looking out the gate at the Babylonians laying siege to the city thinking the same thing. But Isaiah’s message tells us to look beyond – to look beyond our time, to look beyond our immediate circumstances – to see the promise of true peace and the path to it.

I’ll watch at least a couple of different presentations of the Charles Dickens classic story “A Christmas Carol” over the next couple of weeks. You know the character Ebenezer Scrooge – the model of a miserable, lonely, bitter old man. But through a series of visions, Scrooge is reminded of the promise of his own youth and shown the consequences of his life, lived without regard for justice or mercy. Ebenezer Scrooge is thoroughly broken by this realization and begs for a chance to change – for the chance to make the present reality better and the future promise brighter. He is given to understand that he can make a difference, starting in his own small circle.

We have the same opportunity every day, every minute, starting with our leadership and our influence in our own small circle and expanding it to change our world. We can be the sowers of the seeds of true peace, living in God’s promise for the future and making a better present reality. That’s what will happen when we live under the direction of the Holy Spirit – in righteousness, mercy, justice, and the love of Jesus Christ. That is our challenge for today, and for all our lives as Advent people – to be people of peace and justice ourselves and instruments of God’s peace and justice in the world as we anticipate and expect the coming of the Lord.