

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Isaiah 11: 1-10 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

What do we mean when we speak of peace? Is it calm rather than anxiety? Is it the absence of conflict or resentment? Is it the absence of war, and the ceasing of all aggression? Or, even if conflicts were to cease, would this ensure peace within ourselves, a sense of contentment and inner harmony, or would we still sit fidgeting and unsettled in our seats looking for something to have a problem with? What is peace and what is our standard of measurement for such things?

Peace in the Bible, Shalom in Hebrew, is more than just an absence of conflict, or an inner tranquility. Shalom expresses completeness, wholeness, well-being, the idea of unimpaired and rightly fulfilled relationships, of a harmonious community. And while the word shalom does not appear in our Isaiah passage, it is consonant with the vision of it. Isaiah depicts a vision of shalom.

The book of Isaiah encompasses the time period of Babylonian aggression, when Babylon will besiege and conquer Jerusalem. The King of Jerusalem acted imbecilic, contributing to the inevitableness of their fall. Peace, Shalom, is hard to envision at the time, but that is what Isaiah portrays.

How do you imagine community harmony when such stress is on the horizon, or how do you imagine the absence of conflict or the feeling of being unthreatened by predators and stronger forces? Isaiah's context is not an atmosphere that promotes well-being and inner tranquility. And if there is this sense that God has given the people over to Babylon because of their unfaithfulness, then it is hard to even have spiritual tranquility, for God is not pleased with you. Into such a moment, Isaiah speaks of the hope for an anointed leader, someone who sounds like a deliverer, a redeemer, a messiah – “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, / and a branch shall grow out of his roots. / The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.” He will lead with shalom, restoring wholeness and justice and community.

It is a vision poetically articulated, when peace and well-being are hard to imagine, when leaders have failed, and the consequences seem irreversible. Isaiah speaks of a shoot, a green bud coming forth from a stump; some shoot of possibility coming from the seeming impossible. The image of a stump brings back for me the memory of planting a walnut tree with my grandfather in the stump of an old one, a stump then dead and rotting. My grandfather had cut a notch down into the center of that old stump that lay in the center of the farm's driveway by the road, and

there we planted a possibility hoping that it would grow up in the same place as that former sprawling tree.

In truth, I have no memory of a new tree ever growing out of that old trunk. I'm pretty sure nothing came of it. But the practice of planting something new in the nascent mulch of the old was something in and of itself, seeing that old stump as temporary and not final. And this new shoot coming from the stump of Jesse will bring a new sense of shalom and well-being, of not having to live in fear and conflict all the time. It is a vision poetically articulated, of a wolf and lamb lying down together, a child safe from nature's bite, the bear and ox grazing side by side. "They will not hurt or destroy / on all my holy mountain; / for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord / as the waters cover the sea."

In Isaiah's estimation, David's line is a stump. Cut off. That blessed line of David is a mess. And how now shall God lead God's people? Another leader come who can bring about shalom.

We hear the continuation of that hope on the tongue John the Baptist, in our New Testament reading. He proclaims a similar message in the travails and disenchantment of his own era – he too speaks of the leader of the line of Jesse whom God will use to bring about peace, shalom, wholeness, well-being, community, order, balance.

And John the Baptist too will not only cast a vision of such a leader, but will call his followers and all those who would listen to give themselves to this vision, to this hope, to the poetics of possibility – to both language and choices – seeking to bring into being the reality we sing of - to plant a seed in that old stump, to repent, prepare a path for the lord through the wilderness.

And the poetry of this shalom expresses something of the hope without giving us the perfect picture of what will happen. For even John who forecasts this coming leader does not perfectly anticipate or even understand. He expects a leader with winnowing fork, real or metaphorical, who will sift the good from the bad, kicking butt and taking names, bringing the fire of judgment. Even John will eventually ask Jesus, are you one we are waiting for, or should we anticipate another. John did not expect peace and wholeness to come about through sharing meals with the downtrodden and the outcast. John did not anticipate wholeness coming from praying for one's enemies, and forgiving; or from sacrificial love. John gave himself to an emerging possibility that he did not fully understand. Peace, as Levertov says, is like a poem, cannot be imagined before it is made, is not there ahead of itself.

Isaiah's encouraging vision is not a rational one. It is not a historical argument. It is not based on any tangible facts on the ground, nor does it pair well with the narratives being offered in the Jerusalem newspapers. But it is a vision that does two things. One: it counters other narratives. And two: it gives us a vision to live into and according to, to make happen through our own participation, which is why the response Jesus always calls for is to follow.

When I say, counters other narratives, I mean that it reminds us of truths even when they are hard to believe in. When the marching of Babylon's armies can be felt by the rumbling of the ground, Isaiah says God will bring about a time of peace. When all is chaos, the prophet says God is still on the throne. It is in this way that we benefit greatly from a personal relationship with the Lord, not just knowledge about the Lord. For in that daily interaction, we hear a countering voice. When we feel like we don't measure up, that we are not good enough, we hear God's voice of unconditional love, and that through Christ we are enough. When we feel alone and abandoned by friends, we hear a voice that says we are not alone. When we feel that we are flawed and undesirable, we hear a voice that says I love you and am making all things new. When we feel that we have failed, we hear a voice that says you are forgiven. When a voice says that your neighbor is a jerk, another voice calls you to love them as yourself. In our daily walk we try live according to that countering voice.

Yes, Isaiah offers a vision that counters other voices, and he also gives us a poetic vision to live into and according to, to make happen through our own participation.

When I say a poetic vision, I am referring to the fact that it is written as poetry, involves imaginative details and metaphors, but I am also referring to the fact that the prophets were poets. They utter oracles, likely in public squares, written down at the time or later by scribes. But these are oral statements. In fact, in Hebrew the word to read is also the word to call out or proclaim, for you do not read quietly, but utter aloud. And in an illiterate society, things were written down so that they could be proclaimed to a later community. So, these written oracles were initially for the purpose of performing, of proclaiming a vision to a discouraged community – that a messiah would bring about well-being, when they will not have to live in fear and failure and violence and aggression. The wolf will live peacefully with the lamb.

Poetry is a network of reverberations constantly ringing in our ears, making new meaning, and inviting us to new engagement as the landscape of our lives and our minds continually move and evolve. And since the prophets wrote and spoke as

poets, I always think of this poem by Denise Levertov. She writes:

A voice from the dark called out,  
    ‘The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster.

And she also articulates that sense of giving ourselves to the poetic vision. Isaiah’s vision of a peaceable kingdom may not be literal, but it is not a pipe-dream either – it invites us to live into this vision.

    Peace, not only  
the absence of war.’  
    But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can’t be imagined before it is made,  
can’t be known except  
in the words of its making,

For Israel, in the disorientation of grief and confusion, the poetry of the prophet offers a different posture, a different response – a vision of hope and possibility in a situation of powerlessness. And in situations where we cannot construct the logical sentences and thoughts to represent the complexity of the situation, the imagery and language of poetry can express something beyond the limits of those words, can express something of us, can express something for us that the logics of grammar and propositional claims cannot pinpoint.

The voice of the prophet offers a voice to counter what we might call brute reality.

Isaiah speaks of a future fulfilment, but it is a future vision that invites us to participate in it, to bring it into being even as God will someday bring it into being. Isaiah’s oracle invites us to believe in such possibilities of justice, and kindness, of each other’s well-being, of doing right by one another, of living in harmony and mutual love with one another – Isaiah’s vision invites us to give ourselves to the possibilities of shalom, however complex and difficult such wholeness is to attain.

The leader Isaiah cast a vision for, who we now understand to be Jesus, has indeed restored the possibility of shalom in ways unanticipated. Peace, inner and outer, well-being, loving one another, community and kindness. Jesus invites us to pursue the possibilities of peace and shalom. We do it through actions like loving the Lord

with all our being, and loving our neighbors as ourselves, of praying for our enemies and giving to those in need.

Like the audience of Isaiah, or of John the Baptist, we might not know how this all plays out, of what this peaceable kingdom will look like someday. But we are called to live into its possibilities nonetheless, to follow and to go. And as we give ourselves to Shalom even as we can't fully conceive of it, we might have moments where we discover something new is possible, that perhaps a wolf can lie down with a lamb, that perhaps the personal defenses we have built up over the years to protect ourselves won't always be needed, that perhaps the knowledge of the Lord can fill the earth, like waters covering the sea.

And all God's people said...

*The Peaceful Kingdom*

*(Isa 9:1–7)*

- 11** A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- <sup>2</sup> The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- <sup>3</sup> His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
- He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;
- <sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- <sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- <sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.
- <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- <sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- <sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

*Return of the Remnant of Israel and Judah*

- <sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

*The Proclamation of John the Baptist*

*(Mk 1:2–8; Lk 3:1–20)*

**Matthew 3** In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup>“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”