

Waiting on Peace

Luke 1:39–55

Isaiah 11:1–10

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(Luke 1:39–55 NRSV) In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, {40} where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. {41} When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit {42} and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. {43} And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? {44} For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. {45} And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." {46} And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, {47} and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, {48} for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; {49} for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. {50} His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. {51} He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. {52} He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; {53} he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. {54} He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, {55} according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

(Isaiah 11:1–10 NRSV) A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. {2} 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. {3} 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; {4} 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. {5} Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. {6} 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. {7} The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion

shall eat straw like the ox. {8} The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. {9} 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. {10} 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.

Are you ready?

I can't tell you how many times I have heard that phrase this last week -- -- and no telling how many times I will hear it over the next couple of days.

My answer is always the same → Do I have a choice.

Christmas is coming, whether you are ready or not
BUT – Peace may still be elusive

In 1864 one of America's great poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote the poem which became the well-known carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

It is a fascinating poem because of the combination of hope and despair that is found in it.

"I heard the bells on Christmas day their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men."

His hope turns to despair in the following verse:

"And in despair I bowed my head, 'There is no peace on earth,' I said. For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."

Longfellow lived in those terrible moments of the Civil War that claimed more American lives than any other war. In fact, his own son had been seriously wounded in that conflict.

Peace — I don't know about you — but that is something that I am tired of waiting for.

As Christians we are called to see the world differently → some would even suggest that we are naive in our pursuit of peace, justice and love.

Think about the Christmas story → it is all about seeing the world differently.

We hear it but we don't always recognize how ridiculous it is.

- A mother who is a "virgin"
The act of childbirth itself means that Mary cannot be a virgin → or at least perpetually a virgin
- A baby who is a king
Babies aren't kings unless they are born to Royal families, and the patriarch is dead.
- Shepherd who announce his birth
This would be as if garbage men, or custodians, or bus boys were the ones who are given the message of announcing this amazing birth

Who listens to what garbage men or custodians or bus boys have to say on political matters? NOBODY! We don't now and they wouldn't then!

- Weird symbolic gifts that are given
All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king.
Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold because it was valuable
 - Gold – is a symbol of Kingship on earth
 - Frankincense – which is an incense is symbolic of the priesthood
 - Myrrh – an anointing oil used in embalming a body

Who gives a baby embalming oils?

I tell you these gifts are crazy

- The murder of all the children under 2 years old
Outside of the writer of the gospel of Matthew, nobody seems to know of this terrible deed done by Herod.

The story is crazy.

Crazy → not because all of the individual pieces don't make a heck of a lot of sense.

Crazy because it is calling us to look at the world differently

Isaiah's vision, which we as Christians understand as a prophecy about Jesus, is of course, equally ridiculous.

At least it is ridiculous from our "normal" point of view.

Isaiah writes in chapter 11.

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.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD

I mean come on — How silly is that passage.

It is a fairy tale.

Who could believe it.

The only way a lamb and a wolf will play together is in a cartoon — not in the real world.

A calf and a lion eating from the same trough — sure, if the calf is in the trough!

And where will neither animal or human hurt or kill?

Isaiah 11 describes a utopia that is utterly disconnected with our sense of reality.

The wolf and the lamb?
I don't think so.

During this season of Advent – we are being invited through the stories of Jesus birth to look at the world differently and to look at peace differently.

Most of us define peace as an absence of violence – and that certainly is a very accurate description for peace.

But if we explore that word carefully we find that there are many other aspects to peace.

Peace is also a state of tranquility → free from disturbances

Peace is also a sense of mental calm and serenity, a state of no anxiety.

We all know what this sense of peace is all about – or what it is not like!

FEAR -- Fear of test results
Fear of losing our job (home, etc.)
Fear of the future

Jessica graduates in May, do you think she, or many of her classmates have a sense of peace over what their future holds?

The Christmas stories are trying to show us that there is a new way to look at peace.

According to Gandhi, there are two kinds of power: One is obtained by threats of punishment. The other arises from acts of love.

This is not the sentimental sense often associated with the word "love."

Instead, it is a love that has practical, life-transforming power.

After World War I, the Quakers broke the food blockade on Germany and Austria that the world was imposing on them.

They were not motivated by emotional love toward individual Germans, but by a higher sense of what makes things work --- what makes things right.

And in fact, they seem to have been correct.

Thirty years later, Quaker relief groups, were the ONLY groups who were allowed to rescue Jews inside Germany, even at the height of the World War II.

Instead of using threats of punishment → they used what Gandhi referred to as "acts of love," they made an impression on the mindset of people – even though they had been dehumanized by the rhetoric of Hitler.

So, what kind of peace are we hoping for this Christmas?

The peace that the world constantly strives for – a peace that is found at the end of a barrel of a gun or a tomahawk missile – or the peace that the Christmas story offers to us?

Coercive peace?

Or compassionate / counterintuitive peace?

Our choice dictates whether we have more of the same violence — or the peace that passes all understanding.

We may not be able to bring the peace to the globe, but we might be able to bring it to our neighborhood.

Do you realize that there are still homes that still full of mold following the floods of 2008? How can we help those families that are still uprooted in our communities find peace?

And as we act locally, the effects might be felt globally – such is the interconnected nature of our lives today.

Why can it make a difference?

Because we understand peace through the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus offers Justice to the world.

With righteousness, Jesus judges the poor, and decides with equity for the oppressed of the earth.

Jesus destroys the violent not by use of force or threat of punishment, but by speaking the truth: "with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked."

Righteousness and faithfulness shall be his belts, and everything he does will be directed toward justice and good order.

And as we read Isaiah, hear the Christmas stories, and listen to Jesus himself, it is clear that he does this **now** through us.

So, as we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace, are we doing whatever we can to bring peace?

Are we influencing each other through threats of punishment, or through acts of love?

Do we show concern for the poor and the oppressed of the earth?

Do we speak the truth in love, especially to those who are hurting themselves and others?

Stop waiting for peace – and start living it NOW!