

Hope Beyond Ourselves

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
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.
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;
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.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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
as the waters cover the sea.

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.

I attended the South Shore Band Holiday Concert on Friday at the Reformed Church of Huguenot Par, and as Rev. Terry was welcoming folks she made the comment that it was nice to see the church so full, and wouldn't it be great if it was that full on a Sunday morning. There was a laughter as folks acknowledged that churches all over are dealing with low worship attendance. And we pastors often ask ourselves, "Why?" Are we doing anything wrong? Is the message outdated or obsolete?

I don't think so. The reason, I believe, that church attendance is down in our community is that life is going too well for us. Yes, there are medical issues, relationship issues, financial issues – and those are the issues bring a lot of people into this place we call church. And the fact that churches are growing in poorer, more dangerous communities and countries while they're shrinking in safer, more developed countries and communities testifies to this truth. WE'RE PRETTY WELL OFF ECONOMICALLY AND POLITICALLY – despite the chaos in Washington. We live in good homes in good neighborhoods, our children go to good schools, and there aren't many huge issues that threaten our existence. BUT IF THERE WERE, IF STATEN ISLAND WERE UNDER ATTACK OR OUR LIVES WERE IN DANGER, THESE PEWS WOULD BE FILLED. "There are no atheists in foxholes" was the saying. It's the down and out, the oppressed and the persecuted, who cry out to God.

The Bible offer numerous testimonies of this as well; Most of the Old Testament psalms and prophecies are not composed by folks who are well-off. Not many verses in the Bible say, "Lord, I am doing really well – everything is going right for me. I've got my health, my wealth, my family; our nation is strong and safe, and I just want to say 'Thanks.' I just want to worship you." Most of what you read in the Bible is about the downtrodden: people who are crying out to God for mercy and justice, people who feel "under the gun" or in their case, "under the sword." These are people who are perhaps desperately poor, desperately ill, desperately in danger, or all of the above, and they are crying out to God for salvation. And the Old Testament prophets are speaking to the poor and the sick and those in danger and saying, "Hang in there! God has rescued you in the past, and God will rescue you once again in the future."

And the people who are struggling so hard to simply survive are amazingly able to find HOPE in these promises, perhaps because the only thing they have left is God! And those of you who have been in that kind of situation – where the only thing that you have left to hope in is God – are probably here today for that very reason. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear not, for thou art with me." You're either here because you are still in that valley of the shadow of death, or because you can see that it was God who brought you out of it, and you are here to worship him. But if you've never been in that valley you might not feel compelled to worship God; we're too busy enjoying the things that health and wealth and family and national security afford us – good food and entertainment and exercise, freedom to travel in safety. And if we do go through medical, financial, and marital issues we are all too prone to throw God a passing "thanks" and going back to our good lives of wealth, health, and safety.

Now, I don't wish for any catastrophe to land upon any of you. I don't want any of you to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I don't pray that God would deprive anyone of wealth, or health, or peace and harmony within your family. I don't pray that our nation would be invaded by foreign armies and that we all be carried off as slaves like what happened to the people of Israel. But what I DO pray for you is two things:

1. That you would have a profound sense of gratitude to God for all that he has provided you, including life itself. And
2. that you would really STRIVE for Christ's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Because if both of those prayers were answered, you would be the perfect Christians, and this would be a perfect church (until the next person walks through the door). Because simply

speaking, those are the two factors that define the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ: 1) Gratitude to God which instills in your heart a profound desire to worship said God, and 2) a clear sense of mission in this world that sends you out from this place to work as Christ's ambassadors, bringing healing to what is broken in this world, all with a joy of the assurance that the Christ that is ruling your heart is coming someday to rule this world.

AND THAT'S WHAT ADVENT IS ALL ABOUT. The reason we focus on the five themes of peace, hope, joy, trust, and love over five weeks is to build our faith in the one who came on Christmas a few thousand years ago to plant the kingdom of God in our hearts and who will come again on some future Christmas to establish the Kingdom of God over all creation! Jesus makes that amazing promise, which is hard for us to believe because we've gotten so used to violence in this world, and we've become indifferent to the indifference in the world. We don't think of lions eating straw – we think of them eating lambs! That's just the way things are, and it's silly for us to dream of anything different. We satisfy ourselves with a civil order that ensures that we can eat and sleep and raise our families in “relative” safety. And as safe as we may feel behind our awesome military might and our exceptional police force, we know that all our wealth and power cannot fully protect us from the powers of sin and evil that still run rampant in our streets and in our nation. And we know that it's possible that the very people that some may trust to ensure their safety can act unjustly and violently toward others. Violence can land on our doorstep, and even break into our secure homes.

I don't mean to scare you: in fact I want to do the opposite: Last week I spoke of that PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING – a peace that can rule in your heart despite the dangers of this world. And today I'm speaking of the HOPE that true peace, God's peace, will not just rule in your heart but rule this world! That's the vision of Advent. And I ask you, IS THAT YOUR VISION? IS THAT YOUR HOPE? DO YOU HOPE FOR A WORLD THAT IS UNDER GOD'S RULE? Isaiah's vision here is so incredible! He's dealing with a nation that has been ransacked by a foreign army, a people who have been taken away as slaves or left to scrounge around in order to survive, AND HE'S PAINTING A PICTURE OF THIS PERFECT WORLD. What's wrong with this guy? Can't he see the chaos around him? Of course he does, and he describes it in grim detail, BUT HE IS NOT SHAKEN FROM HIS FAITH THAT WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE. I don't think my imagination could have gone as far as Isaiah's did. I think that the most that **I** could have hoped for was to find enough food and shelter to get me through the next day. If I was a slave, my greatest HOPE might have been to have a decent person as my master, one who didn't randomly beat me or make unreasonable demands. But Isaiah presents this ideal vision to these thoroughly downtrodden people. HE GIVES THEM A HOPE IN SOMETHING MORE THAN SURVIVAL, HE GIVES THEM A HOPE IN SOMETHING MORE THAN PERSONAL. HE GIVE A WORLD VISION that could only come from a God who can do what we humans would call IMPOSSIBLE!

What is YOUR greatest hope? Is it to own your house, pay off your mortgage? To provide a safe, nurturing environment for your children? To have food on your table each day and be able to sleep in relative safety each night? ISIAH IS CHALLENGING US TO THINK MUCH BIGGER THAN THAT, TO THINK OF THIS WORLD AS GOD'S WORLD, A WORLD THAT IS TRULY BEYOND OUR HUMAN EXPECTATIONS OR OUR HUMAN CAPABILITIES; **THAT IS THE HOPE THAT WE ARE REMINDED OF DURING**

ADVENT. And it's a hope that forces us to look not just outward to the true peace that will rule the entire world; it's a hope that forces us to look deep within ourselves, to our very soul. Because Isaiah is envisioning more than economic and political restoration; he's envisioning SPIRITUAL restoration, and for a restoration to occur OUTSIDE ourselves in this physical world it must first occur WITHIN us, at the very core of our being.

I was blessed to have a restless soul. My family, like many others, was materially blessed, but I myself was spiritually impoverished. I don't blame anyone for this; I had great parents and great siblings. True, my parents' marriage started falling apart probably before I was aware of it, But they did their very best to provide me with all the safety and security and love that parents could provide. But I wanted more than what my parents could provide me. I wanted more than what the world could provide me. In my soul there was anger and frustration, not just because my family wasn't perfect or because I thought I wasn't receiving enough love. I was angry because there didn't seem to be enough love in the world. People were lying and cheating and killing each other to own things or to keep power or to get attention. I don't know; it didn't make a lot of sense to me, and that made me unhappy. What's worse, I saw in myself the same desires to own things and to have power and to get attention that I saw in others. And that made me even more unhappy. But like I said, I WAS BLESSED TO HAVE A RESTLESS SOUL because it drove me to search for something better. AND AFTER MANY YEARS OF UNHAPPINESS AND FRUSTRATION AND STUMBLING AROUND, I MET JESUS. It wasn't a sudden flash of light or voice out of the clouds. I think it was more a gradual realization that his love for me and for this world was strong enough to heal me and heal this world. And so that's where I invested my time and my energy. And that is where I gain my joy, and I'll talk about that next week.

BUT ESSENTIAL TO MY PEACE AND MY JOY ARE THE REALIZATION THAT I AM CONNECTED TO EVERYONE IN THIS WORLD, AND THAT NO AMOUNT OF SECURITY OR PRIVILEGE OR FAME OR FORTUNE CAN EVER BRING ME TRUE PEACE AND TRUE JOY. THAT CAN ONLY HAPPEN WHEN GOD RULES THE WORLD, YOUR HEART, MY HEART, AND EVERYONE ELSE'S HEART.

So the take-home:

1. Set very high hopes – not just for a transitory peace but an ETERNAL peace that can only happen when God alone rules this world.
2. Be transformed from the inside as you work in Christ to transform what is outside.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.