

## Making Room at the Manger: Keeping the Vision Alive

### Isaiah 11: 1-11

One of my practices in preparing a sermon is going back over the last few years to see what I have said on any given particular text. I'll admit this practice is a hit or miss thing. Some sermons when I look back at them, I think "Wow! That is a great statement and other sermons....well, let's just say I give thanks for God's grace.

So no surprise, I found myself going back over past sermons this week and realized that almost to the day, I had preached on this particular text a year ago. Granted, Isaiah is a favorite during Advent time with all his prophetic statements about the coming Messiah, but what struck me was that a year ago, I shared that I was feeling more melancholy than hopeful, more anxious than filled with a sense of peace, more worried than mindful. Last year at this time along our Advent journey I shared that I felt more like weeping than rejoicing when I heard Isaiah's beautiful hope-filled vision. And this year, nothing has changed. I still feel the same way today as I did a year ago, maybe even more so.

Because, you see, I find myself asking the same questions again as I read this particular text...asking again if peace is even possible for our world when it seems we have become so numb to the suffering that is all around us This week as

I read Isaiah's words, I found myself wondering again if peace is even possible because it seems like we as people of faith have come to accept that the chaos which fills our world is just our "new" normal, and we are okay with that. It is almost like we honestly believe that this disorder is what God really intended for God's creation all along. A year later, after reading Isaiah's words, what strikes me is that I still find myself asking if peace is even possible, wondering if it is time to just give up this whole vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom being here on earth?

Now, while I'm being honest with everyone, I cannot deny that I thought about just preaching last year's sermon today, because truth be told, a year later, I'm not sure I am any closer to having the answers to these painful, soul-wrenching, dark and depressing questions. I tried to reason with myself by saying that if I can't remember what I said five minutes ago, let alone a year ago, maybe the congregation wouldn't either. We would have a sermon for the day, such as it is and everything would be okay.

Thankfully, the Spirit of God put an end to that way of thinking real quick. It reminded me that part of why our world is so broken right now is that we humans often look for quick fixes to complicated issues. Then when there aren't any, we get frustrated, often walking away rather than doing the hard work.

Through the prophet Isaiah's words, the Spirit once again reminded me that the work of peace takes time. It takes listening and patience. It takes us moving

beyond just accepting to becoming uncomfortable with the way things are. It takes us making room at the manger for this impossible dream to become reality here on earth, planting the seeds so that the love of God can enter in and do the rest.

Here's why I say this. We have to remember that Isaiah is sharing this vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom at one of the most depressing times during Israel's history. The nation of Judah was under constant attack by the Assyrians. The king was one of the worst kings ever in their history. People were ignoring God. The poor were being oppressed and forgotten. Isaiah's world was broken and hurting. It was divided and the possibility of peace seemed so far off for the people of God, very much like it feels for us now.

Then Isaiah had this vision of peace. It was no ordinary vision. It was a vision that was full of life, full of possibilities for the people of God. In this vision, we are told of a shoot, breaking through the dark, hard ground, reaching for the light, bringing forth new life. In this vision, we are told of a righteous and honorable king, a leader who will wear faithfulness around his waist, and righteousness as his belt, a leader who will bring justice to the poor and the oppressed, a leader who will reside in the Spirit and presence of God. In this vision, we are told of a place where natural enemies lay down with one another, where death and fear are no more. Through this vision, Isaiah invites the people to dream, to imagine a reality beyond just what they could see. The same way this

vision invites us to do today. With his words, Isaiah invites us to let this dream, this vision take root in our hearts. He invites us to allow it to become a light against the darkness. Isaiah's vision tells us again and again that God will one day bring about justice and peace for All of God's creation. It reminds us of a very important thing which we as people of faith seem to have forgotten. This vision reminds us again that one day the impossible will be made possible through God redeeming grace and love.

After all, God's story is so much bigger than we can even imagine. God's story is a story where a ninety year old woman bears a son. God's story is a story where God works through a man who lies and cheats his brother out of his birthright and, then later in life, this same man becomes a father of a great nation. God's story is a story where a man is told to build a boat on dry land because a flood is coming. Everyone laughed at Noah until the rains start coming down. God's story is about a baby lying in a manger who would one day grow up and transform this world through his words and his actions.

You see, God's story is a story where the impossible is made possible. It is a story where the impossible dream of hope is made a reality. Isaiah wants us to know that God's story is a vision where peace is a possibility, despite or maybe because of a world which is so broken, so divided, so hurt, that we as humankind

cannot make it right all on our own. Only God can do that. And if we don't have this vision, then we have got nothing.

Or let me say it this way...a fellow colleague shared with me a conversation she had had with a church member. It all started when this church member said, "My faith is leaving me." On the heels of expressing her disdain with all that is going on in our world, in our country, this church member said, "It is simply too much and asked the question of her pastor, "Where is God in all this?"

My colleague shared that in that moment it felt like the darkness was overtaking both of them. She knew she couldn't offer the usual religious speak or simple platitudes to make everything okay for this person. So instead, my colleague simply took this church member's hand and said, "God is all we have".

Later as this pastor had time to reflect on this conversation, she remembered some of Viktor Frankl's writings. In these writings, he shared stories of the Jewish concentration camps in which he shared that people who gave up on God were some of the very people who never made it out.

As my colleague told me all this, I couldn't help but think on the words from Proverbs, the ones that tell us, "If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what God reveals, they are most blessed.

Let me say that again... If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what God reveals, they are most blessed.

If there is no vision, the people will perish. They will perish in heart. They will perish in spirit. They will perish in faith. Without the vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom to guide us, to inspire us, to keep us grounded in the presence of God, we as people of faith will begin to dry up. In doing so, we become irrelevant. We become shadows of ourselves. We lose our prophetic voice. Without this vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom becoming a reality here on earth to guide us, to inspire us, we perish and we forget our call to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's children.

That's why we need Isaiah's vision. Regardless of how impossible it might seem, this vision calls us to remember all the times we have already experienced God working in our life, bringing forth healing and wholeness. As people of faith, we have already seen how God can make a way out of no way. We have already experienced how the light of love is not extinguished by the darkness. We have already experienced God's promises of hope and grace in our own lives. We already know how the story ends.

Regardless of what it may seem, regardless of what this world says, God's peace is happening right now before our eyes in small and life changing ways. It is

waking us up from our compassion fatigue. It is calling us to speak words of reconciliation, to do acts of justice. As people of faith, this vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom becoming a reality here on earth for all of God's people calls us to believe that the impossible is always made possible through the love and grace of God.

By keeping this vision of hope, this vision of peace alive, we begin to create space here on earth which reflects the Kingdom of God. By keeping this vision alive, we begin making room at the manger for all of God's people. We begin reflecting a reality where all are welcomed and embraced as beloved children of God. And there is no better time to get started than right now.

So despite the questions, despite the wonderings, always know that peace on earth is a real possibility all because our God is still at work in this world, making the impossible possible. In the meantime, until that day comes, may we begin to plant the seeds of hope, plant the seed of peace in our community, in our nation, and in our world so that God's redeeming love can enter in and take care of the rest. Amen.