

Patterns of God's Peace

Isaiah 11: 1-10

This is one of my favorite texts from the Book of Isaiah. Usually when I hear it, I find myself feeling hopeful. I begin to anxiously await the day when this promise will be fulfilled, something we all tend to do on our Advent journeys. But this year, not so much. To be honest, at this point on my Advent, I am feeling more melancholy than hopeful, more anxious than filled with a sense of peace, more worried than mindful. This year, I have to tell you I feel more like weeping than rejoicing when I hear Isaiah's beautiful hope-filled vision.

And here's why: Usually when I read these words from Isaiah, I am reminded of the way things should be...the way things should be in our world, the way we should treat each other, the way things should be when it comes right down to human decency and kindness. Usually when I read this text about God's Peaceable Kingdom, I find comfort in the images. I am inspired by them; images where the lion lays with the lamb, where mothers don't worry about their children getting hurt when they reach down into the adder's den; images of a community filled with peace on earth; images where no one goes to bed hungry, where no one lives in fear, images where people are welcomed and embraced as God's own beloved ones.

But this year, when I read these words from Isaiah, it is not a vision of peace that comes to mind. Rather instead, I see the harsh realities of our world, realities that stand in stark contrast to Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom.

This year, when I hear these beautiful haunting words from the prophet, unfortunately, I come face to face with the ugly truth that we live in a world that is miles away from the one Isaiah envisions. It hits home that we live in a world where the lion destroys the lamb, a world where mothers watch their children die from starvation and disease. We live in a world where people live in fear each and every day, wondering when the next bomb will drop, wondering when the next spray of gunfire will occur, wondering how long they will be forgotten in a refugee camp.

In contrast to Isaiah's dream, a dream that usually brings me comfort and peace, this year, it just reminds me that we live in a world that is divided, broken and hurting. Instead of the Peaceable Kingdom, our reality is more like Where the Wild Things Are where Monsters roar their terrible roars, snarl their terrible teeth, where hate is allowed to grow more and more each day, where acts of violence increase more and more and the excuses given for these hurtful acts are: Someone didn't like the other person's race, the other person's gender, the other person's sexual orientation, the other person's religion or simply because they didn't like

the way that other person was looking at them. All of these have become acceptable reasons for the hurt and hate that fills our world.

This year, as I read Isaiah's words of promise, promises that tell us one day, God's Kingdom will come and be among us, I found that I am not very hopeful. I found myself wondering if these are just words on a page instead of a promise waiting to be fulfilled.

This year, I found myself asking questions like: Is peace even a possibility for and in our broken and hurting world, asking questions like: will this dream ever come to be a reality. I found myself asking these questions because well...unfortunately, it seems like we as a society, we as a culture are no longer disturbed by the violence in the world. It seems like we no longer will blink an eye at the images of death and disease that we encounter each and every day. No longer are we outraged by the stories of discrimination and oppression. Instead, it seems like we all have compassion fatigue.

So this year, as I read the words of God's promises of peace, I have to tell you, that I found myself wondering: Is peace possible for our world when we have become so numb to the suffering that is all around us? Is peace even possible when we as people of faith have come to accept the disorder and chaos that fills our world as our "new" normal, as how God intended for God's creation? Is peace

even possible when it seems like we have become so content to sit in the darkness, waiting for this mystical, magical someone to come along and make it right? As people of faith, as we look around at our world, we can't help but ask ourselves, Is peace even possible or should we just give up this vision of a Peaceable Kingdom on earth?

I know... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be a Debbie Downer. But these are the questions that have been circling around in my head all week. These are the questions that have turned my usually easy Advent journey into rough terrain. I know that I am not the first to have these wonderings. These questions and so many others have been asked for years by people of faith, people who were and are tired of the brokenness, people who were and are tired the hurt that fills our world, people who were and are tired of feeling helpless when we come face to face with the ugliness that fills our world.

Yes, I know I'm not the first to ask these things. And yes, I know that I will not be the last. I am just adding my voice to the same wonderings that have been shared throughout all generations by people who have waited, people who have longed for God's promise of peace to be fulfilled here on earth.

I know I am not alone in this hope, in this longing and surprisingly, in that gift, I can find my faith again.

Let me explain: Isaiah asked the same things I asked this past week. As he looked around his world, it seemed hopeless, pointless to dream, to vision, to hold on to the pattern of promises for peace given to the people of God. He wondered if peace was even possible given the darkness that was threatening to overtake his community. He wondered and longed for God's Peaceable Kingdom to come to fruition but everything around him, the suffering, the destruction, the endless brokenness of his people, all seemed to tell him peace was impossible.

Because, well, just to give us all little background as we look at this text, when Isaiah wrote down these words of promise, he was writing them during one of the darkest times in Israelite 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, hurting and divided and the promise of peace seemed so far off for the people of God at that time.

But then Isaiah had this vision of peace and it was no ordinary vision. It was a vision that was full of promise, 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 resides 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, a place that invites us to dream beyond just what we can see and in that dreaming, in that vision, in that promise, know that God wills and will one day bring about justice and peace for All of God's creation.

All in all, we are told of a vision where the impossible is made possible.

Soon as this vision came into the people's hearts and sparked their imagination, their eyes were opened and they were able to see the bigger picture. In this time of despair and darkness, God had not forgotten them or forsaken them. Instead, God had been working, weaving together a tapestry of hope and peace, putting it together piece by piece, creating a pattern of wholeness for all of God's creation.

Just like the people of Israel, when we step back and open our hearts, open our minds, open our eyes to the bigger picture, we can begin to see a pattern, a pattern of God's promises for peace filling the world, and we can find our hope, we can find our faith, we can find our light of love once again, a light that has been promised to overcome any darkness we may encounter.

Isaiah shares this vision with the people of God to remind them, to remind us that God's story is so much bigger than we can even imagine. God's story is a story where the impossible is made possible. 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, 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 laughs at Noah until the rains start coming down.

You see, God's story is a story where the impossible is made possible, 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 that is so broken, so divided, so hurt, that we as humankind cannot make it right all on our own.

Isaiah knows that God's story is our story. It is a story that stretches our assumptions about what can be. It is a story that speaks to the promises of God for the people of God, promises that speak to our hopes, that speaks to God's desire for peace for all of God's creation. It is a story based on the pattern of God's promises for peace, a pattern that shapes us and transforms us into the people God created us, calls us to be, a pattern of promises that shape us into the very people the world needs us to be right here, right now.

He shares this vision of hope to shake his community, to shake us up out of our stupor. He wants them and us to know that we have been numb for far too long. We have forgotten our connection to this wonderful life-transforming story and in doing so, we have let the world tell the story of what is and what is not possible.

Too often, we have believed the world when it told us death, darkness, and pain are normal and that we should accept them as the status quo. Too often, we have believed the world when it said that there was nothing we could do to change the way things are or make it right. Too often, we have believed the world when it told us that we were wrong for dreaming of peace and that instead, we just put our heads down and ignore the suffering that is happening all around us.

As people of faith, we have forgotten God's promises to us. We have not seen the pattern of God's peace filling our world, filling our hearts, reminding us that time and time again, God has always been faithful in the promises that God has made and continues to make to the people of God.

That's why we need Isaiah's vision. Regardless of how impossible it might seem, it calls us to remember all the times we have already experienced God working in our life, bringing forth healing and wholeness. 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.

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, waking us up from our compassion fatigue, calling us to speak words of reconciliation, to do acts of justice. As people of faith, we are called to believe that the impossible is always possible through the love and grace of God. And in doing so, take this pattern of God's promise for peace and work to create a community here on earth that reflects the Kingdom of God, a community where all are welcomed and embraced as beloved children of God.

And there is no better time to get started than now.

There is a story of a young boy who lives in a war ravaged country. He is surrounded by rumble and is separated by a heavily guarded barbed wire fence. In this place of desolation and despair, this young boy finds a tiny green sprout. Nurturing the vine, he watches it grow into a vibrant oasis. And as the vines grow they cover the barbed wire fence which separates the boy's village from the rest of the country. The children begin to come and play together. Others come to rest, and get away from the darkness.

But soon some soldiers come and cut down the vines, the winter comes and it seems that all hope is lost. However, soon a green shoot comes from the old dry stumps. Together, the young boy and a girl on the other side of the fence begin to cultivate the new vines and they create a glorious, shared garden. And when asked about the garden by his father, when asked wasn't he worried the garden would be destroyed again, the young boy simply replied: "Let the soldiers return . . . the Roots of hope are deep, and seeds of peace spread . . . One day, soon the fence that separates us will disappear forever."

As people of faith, we are called to cultivate the pattern of God's promise for peace, to View the present through this promise, knowing that Christ will come again. We are called to Trust despite the deepening darkness, and know that Christ will come again. As people of faith, we are called to lift the world above its grieving through our watching and believing in the hope past hope's conceiving and know that Christ will come again.

May it be so. Amen.