

August 19, 2018



“RE-CREATION: ENVISIONING PEACE”

Isaiah 11:6-9

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As we gather together today for the Blessing of the Animals which will take place in our Chambliss Outdoor Worship Center later this morning, Isaiah paints for us a beautiful image of creation at peace. In Isaiah’s prophecy which we normally hear during Advent, the wolf dwells with the lamb, the leopard lies down with the kid (baby goat), while the calf, the lion, and the fatling are found together as a little child leads them all. The cow and the bear graze in the same field as their young lie down together. The lion becomes a vegetarian like the ox. Infants play over the hole of deadly asps while toddler’s place their hands in the den of an adder.

In Isaiah’s vision of peace, predator and prey dwell side by side. It seems to harken back to the beginning of creation, in the garden, where all was perfect. Even humans lived in peaceful relationship with the whole of creation. Isaiah’s image is amazing. It makes for a beautiful painting; it’s the sense of God’s *shalom* for which most of us long. And it’s just entirely too good to be true, isn’t it?

We live in a world that is not as serene as Isaiah’s dreams for us. *Tom and Jerry* taught us at an early age that cats eat mice and dogs go after cats. In fact, the cartoon images of animal instincts abound: Tweety and Sylvester, Wyle E. Coyote and Roadrunner, and the list goes on. Beyond the cartoons of our childhood, Isaiah’s vision is not the experience of our everyday lives, is it?

As Dawn and I headed out for a cruise on the Baltic Sea the other week, we heard about a Russian naval parade that was taking place near St. Petersburg, Russia, in the direction that we were headed. One day, while we were eating dinner in our ship’s dining hall, we suddenly noticed a submarine that had surfaced going by. While we were enjoying the rest that comes with a vacation, we were suddenly mindful of the obvious symbols of a world that still struggles to find *shalom*.

Just the other day, we heard the news of a school bus in Yemen that was hit with a bomb that appears to have been dropped by Saudi forces. While fighting against a militia that is believed to be working to overthrow democratically elected officials, 40 of the 51 people who died were children. Of the 79 wounded, 56 were children.¹ As long as violence and warfare seem to be our way, it’s hard to imagine that Isaiah’s vision is anything more than a dream that couldn’t be possible this side of heaven.

When in our daily lives we experience broken relationships or the bitterness of words spoken that cannot be retrieved, we find ourselves longing for Isaiah's image of peace, but feeling as if it is only a distant dream that can never be fully realized in a lifetime. While Isaiah doesn't use the word *shalom*, in verses six through nine we experience his hope for God's sense of peace and wholeness as a dream that seems as if it will never come to pass.

Dawn and I began our journey to visit some of the areas of the Baltic Sea at the end of July as we flew into Berlin, Germany. When she was young, Dawn's father served in the United States Air Force and was stationed in Germany in the mid 1970s. She started elementary school while they lived there. She can remember her parents and her aunt who had come to live with them traveling to Berlin from West Germany when she was just a young girl. It was a dangerous route, however, through East German territory controlled by the Soviets at the time. She was too young to go because of the dangers involved, so she stayed at home with a babysitter.

Her mother and aunt talk about how they traveled by car, hoping that they drove fast enough not to cause suspicion of their whereabouts and slow enough not to encounter a hefty speeding ticket for traveling from one checkpoint to the next.

The other week, as we stood near the remnants of the Berlin Wall thinking of the time that her family members camped out there alongside the wall, longing for the day when it would fall, it was a powerful moment for us. Her aunt was with us and shared about their fears and dreams from that night that they camped alongside the wall.

Standing in Berlin near walkways that outline where the wall once stood, Isaiah's words filled my mind again. When the wall was torn down so many years ago, we didn't realize the fullness of Isaiah's vision of *shalom*, or God's hope of peace for all of creation, in those moments, but perhaps it was a step towards it. Looking around the other week, we could still see the differences between East and West as well as the places where the two had come together to become one.

Elsewhere in Berlin, we stood in the remnants of Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church which was bombed out in World War II. Intentionally, the building was left mostly unrestored as a reminder of the costs of war. Inside, however, the mosaics captivated the eyes. Just down the street, we entered the rebuilt church with a sanctuary surrounded by pieces of mainly blue stained glass that welcome its visitors. Somehow the two together stand as a testimony and reminder of the costs of war as well as our common hopes for peace throughout the world.

Whether it was underground bastions of old or the KGB museum, both in Tallinn, Estonia, or the golden gilded palaces of tsarist Russia alongside utilitarian soviet housing and modern-day museums in St. Petersburg, all along our travels, Dawn and I began to marvel both at the reminders of past struggles as well as contemporary steps towards a better world.

Is it really that Isaiah's dreams of peace, or *shalom*, are just too good to be true? How could it be that animals known to be predators might somehow give up feasting on animals known to be prey? Even if the predators did, how could the prey ever feel safe when they've only known the

predator to be trouble? It's hard to see Isaiah's vision when we live in a Tom and Jerry type world, where dogs chase cats and cats eat mice.

Could it be that Isaiah's image is placed within a vision of the restoration of creation because it's almost as hard to imagine predator and prey sharing life side-by-side as it is for us to envision the realization of God's *shalom* in a world where violence, fears, and notions of enemies keep us at arm's length from one another? Yet, if we look around, we might see the steps towards God's vision of the blessed community in our own lifetimes, whether they be in torn down walls across the ocean or a mission project to provide 600 pairs of shoes for elementary school children in Detroit.

You see, friends, peace is not something that we need to wait to experience in heaven above, but something towards which we are constantly working here on earth. God's sense of *shalom*, living in harmony with one another, can be realized in the present as we work towards it. God invites us to be the blessed community now! It may take time before the wolf will live with the lamb, but we hold out the hope of that dream before us so that one day we might see the reality that Isaiah sums up when he says in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*: "The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide."²

While we were in Berlin, we visited the Checkpoint Charlie museum where we saw the images of those who sacrificed to bring people from the east to the west, hidden in trunks, under seats, and in suitcases. After the wall came down, some of the greatest sacrifices were the willingness of people across borders to learn to trust one another again, enough to risk living in relationship with one another.

Does this mean that peace requires us to roll over and become as weak and vulnerable as a pet seeking a belly rub? Does peace somehow make us look weak?

If we were to read the verses just preceding our passage this morning, we would hear that the first part of Isaiah's vision is for a restored sense of justice and righteousness that comes from the stump of Jesse, David's father. This vision of Isaiah for peace in today's scriptures is placed against his hopes for God's justice to reign.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1984, he shared the following words:

When will we learn that human beings are of infinite value because they have been created in the image of God, and that it is a blasphemy to treat them as if they were less than this and to do so ultimately recoils on those who do this? In dehumanizing others, they are themselves dehumanized. Perhaps oppression dehumanizes the oppressor as much as, if not more than, the oppressed. They need each other to become truly free, to become human. We can be human only in fellowship, in community, in koinonia, in peace.

Let us work to be peacemakers, those given a wonderful share in Our Lord's ministry of reconciliation. If we want peace, so we have been told, let us work for justice. Let us beat our swords into ploughshares.

God calls us to be fellow workers with Him, so that we can extend His Kingdom of Shalom, of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, joy and reconciliation, so that the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.³

Later this morning as we yet again baptize some of our youngest ones, we'll affirm once more as a congregation our own vows and our common commitment to live out what it means to be God's blessed community here on earth, until God's *shalom* is fully realized among us.

May our closing song be our prayer this day and all days until the day when there are no more days and together we experience God's *shalom*, peace, as God restores and renews creation together with us:

Let there be peace on earth
and let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth,
the peace that was meant to be.
With God our Creator,
children all are we.
Let us walk with each other
in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me
Let this be the moment now.
With ev'ry step I take,
let this be my solemn vow:
to take each moment
and live each moment
in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth
and let it begin with me.

Isaiah saw it: "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."⁴ May we bold enough to live it!

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/17/middleeast/us-saudi-yemen-bus-strike-intl/index.html>

² Isaiah 11:9, *The Message*.

³ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1984/tutu/lecture/>

⁴ Isaiah 11:9, NRSV.