

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year A)

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.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.''

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

It's the second Sunday of Advent so, today, we light the candle for peace.

Peace means something different to each one of us, I suppose. For an introvert like me, peace might mean a nice quiet afternoon watching TV alone or reading a book on my back porch. If you're an extrovert, peace might mean a relaxing dinner with a large group of friends. If you're a college or grad student, peace might mean the feeling of receiving a good grade on that midterm you stayed awake all night to study for. If you're a person without a home, peace might mean the feeling of a warm bed and a full stomach at Maureen's Haven on a Wednesday night at Southold Presbyterian Church. Peace looks different in the eyes of the beholder.

Perhaps take a minute to reflect, right now, on a recent time in your life that you would describe as "peace." Not just "happy." Not just "OK." But truly peace-full. Go ahead. Take a minute and take yourself back there.

It was nice, wasn't it? I'm betting, if you're anything like me, then you probably think that that moment disappeared far too quickly.

Tricia and I have a new favorite TV show called "This Is Us." If you haven't watched it yet, then I give it my highest recommendation! On the past week's episode, an elderly character on the show was asked a startlingly blunt question. It just so happens that this gentleman is an elderly black man who is dying of cancer who has recently been united with his biological son who he gave up for adoption as an infant. The man is asked the following question: "what does it feel like to be dying?" The man takes a moment and then responds by saying something like this: "it's like seeing all of these beautiful things, these beautiful, perfect moments, flying around you but they're going too fast and you can't grab on to all of them."

Sometimes, I wonder if that's not how we treat peaceful moments as well. We have these moments of peace, of warmth, of safety, of contentment, and we want to cling on to them as long as possible. But they slip through our fingers. We wait for the next moment of peace, whenever it will come, and we are grateful when it does.

We are in a society that is in need of peace. A recent cartoon by Peter Waldner made quite the stir here on this island. After last month's election, his cartoon depicted a tattered and bruised American flag. Although some people considered his cartoon to be unpatriotic and disgusting, I found it to be a true testament to how this country feels. We do not feel "peaceful." We feel battered and bruised, on all sides.

We crave peace. But sometimes we sit around and wait for peace to come to us instead of going out and looking for it ourselves.

Today's passage from Isaiah, which John read for us just a few minutes ago, gives us an image of peace. However, this promised peace is not just a moment that will disappear after a few precious minutes. No, this peace is an *everlasting peace*, a peace that we will not have to cling on to because it will always be there.

The wolf will hang out with the lamb. The leopard will have a cup of coffee with the kid. The calf and the lion will join hands and sing "Kum-Ba-Yah." The child will play carelessly by the snake's nest and the watching mother will think nothing of it. We could continue the list to bring it into our own world if we so dared. Our Call to Worship already hinted at it.

Israel and Palestine will tear down their wall.

Black lives and poor lives will matter to all.

Democrats and Republicans will work together in harmony.

What other images could you add to this list?

Today's passage from Isaiah calls us, its readers, to practice a little of what might be called "prophetic imagination." Today, you and I are called to put on our imagination hats and imagine a world in which all of these things are possible. We are called to play pretend for a moment and consider a place where fear had no place, anger had slipped into memory, and violence had long lost its allure.

That is why we light this candle of peace; to remind us that hope is not enough. We have to know what it is that we hope *for*. Together, we are called to hope for peace.

But peace does not happen on its own. If we look back on history, steps towards peace did not just happen by coincidence. Progress in peace has taken people like you and me stepping up and doing something. Slavery would never have ended had abolitionists not stood up. Women's suffrage would not have been accomplished without the brave women like Susan B. Anthony whose grave gets covered with "I Voted" stickers every November. The Civil Rights movement would not have happened had people not wanted peace so much as to actually *do* something to achieve it for all people.

Peace does not happen on its own. If peace happened on its own, then Jesus Christ would not have come to us in the flesh to be God-with-us. If peace happened on its own, there would be no need of Advent, or Christmas. If peace happened on its own, we would never sing "Away in a Manger" or "Angels We Have Heard On High" or "Joy to the World." If peace happened on its own, then there would be little need of disciples like you and me.

Jesus Christ came to this world because peace does not happen on its own. Peace is something that God intends for us. The problem is this: we humans have not always done a very good job of working *with* God in achieving it. We are a rebellious people. Too often, instead of seeing the beauty and promise and possibility of the lovely images in today's Isaiah passage, we laugh at the absurdity of a baby cow snuggling with a fully grown lion.

Peace does not happen on its own. That's because peace is a fruit that has to be carefully planted, tended, and harvested. It takes people who know how precious it is. It takes people like you and me that know where it needs to be planted and where it needs to be protected and where it needs to be shared.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew shows us a blunt picture of John the Baptist reminding us to "bear good fruit." There are places on this very island that could sure use some "peace plantings." As a worshiping community gathered to prepare for the coming of our Lord and Savior, we cannot afford to sit idly by and wait for someone else to bring about peace.

So in your corner of the island this week, take a moment to bring about peace for you or, even better yet, someone else. It might seem insignificant to you, but I can guarantee you it won't be insignificant for them.

Friends, we're not there yet. The eternal kingdom of peace that we see in today's Isaiah passage is not here yet. But we have been promised. And that's the direction we're heading in. Soon and very soon we are going to see the King, friends. And among his many names is this: Prince of Peace. Shall we greet him with the same old same old? Or shall we greet him as he deserves to be greeted, with songs of peace and thanksgiving for the goodness of God?

I'll leave you with this: I love Pope Francis. He's something else! One of my favorite quotes by him goes something like this: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works."

I like to think that's how praying for peace works, too. We do not pray for peace and then sit around waiting for it to fall into our laps. No. We pray for peace and then we get to work going out into the world to be peacemakers. That's how peace works. It works by practicing it and finding out how contagious it can be.

So, go pray for peace this week. But don't just light a candle for it. Light a fire under your rear end to get up and practice it in the name of the Prince of Peace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.