

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: Advent 2

Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:1-13, Matthew 3:1-12

04 December 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Commissioned as Candles of Peace”

Today we lit the candle of peace.

And then we proceeded to listen to readings which contained anything but peace.

When John the Baptist sees the devoutly religious people coming, he screams at 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 the stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now the ax 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.... One who is more powerful than I is coming after me...

His winnowing fork is in his hand.... The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

That doesn't sound very peaceful, does it?

Paul is writing to a congregation which is not at peace

because they are deeply divided between Jews and Gentiles.

The Psalmist speaks in hope of all the good things the king's son will do,

but it's not totally peaceful work since the king's son will be crushing the oppressor.

Even the prophecy in Isaiah about the lion lying down with the lamb

mentions that the promised one will strike the earth and kill the wicked.

For as long as human beings have been around,

it would seem like we've had a deep desire for peace,

and yet persistent, enduring, ongoing peace, has always eluded us.

So how are you and I supposed to find peace? How are you and I supposed to be peacemakers?

The key actually lies in those first verses from Isaiah 11,

A shoot shall come out from the stump 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...of counsel and might...of knowledge

and awe at God's power and joy at God's love.

Peace, you see, like every good gift, is not something that we manufacture on our own.

Rather, it is the result of our relationship with God.

Notice that the passage begins with an image of new life coming out of old.

In this prophecy, God is saying through Isaiah

that from the seemingly dead stump of Jesse, the father of Israel's greatest king David,

a new living shoot will grow,

a descendant upon whom the Spirit of God will rest with its 7-fold gifts,

which will empower that Savior to bring new life to individuals

and a new kingdom to all the world.

We know that shoot, that branch of Jesse, to be Jesus, the one of whom John speaks when he says,

“I baptize you with water for repentance,

but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

In other words, it is through our participation in Christ's death and resurrection

through water baptism that we too are raised to new life, and a new shoot, a living branch,

begins to grow out of the seemingly dead stump of our spirits.

And then through the fiery baptism of the Holy Spirit, we, too, receive the 7-fold gifts,

which, when nurtured, will bear the 9 fruits of the spirit, one of which is peace.

That's the explanation on a theological level, but let's get practical.

The only way there will be peace in the world is if we bring it through our work of peacemaking,
and we can only be peacemakers when we have peace within ourselves.

And we can only find peace within ourselves

through our ongoing, moment to moment relationship with God in the here and now.

We can only step into the Prince of Peace's kingdom in the present moment.

Let me explain.

The things that keep us from experiencing peace and harmony and unity

are the thoughts and feelings regarding ourselves and others

that are centered in our guilt or hurt over things in the past or in our fear of the future.

Let me give you 2 examples of how focusing on the past –

either on someone else's actions or on our own actions can keep us from experiencing peace.

If someone has hurt me in the past, and I have not totally forgiven them and been completely reconciled to them,
then every interaction I have with them will be clouded

by hurt and anger and suspicion and mistrust and what I say or do will be in reaction to them.

My mind will be on what happened in the past

and I will be remembering and reliving what he or she did to me

and will feel like I'm locked in a struggle with them,

at the very least defending myself against them and maybe even attacking them.

Or maybe it's not what someone else did to me in the past, but something I have done.

If I have not confessed and repented and been reconciled to God over the matter,

then in every similar situation that arises,

my actions will be clouded by shame or guilt or fear of failure

and if I'm unaware of what I've done I may find myself repeating past behaviors,

or if I am aware, I may find myself to afraid to try again

or I may over compensate & try too hard.

So whether it's my own actions or the actions of another, if I have not let go of the past,

I cannot enter into the kingdom of God, and I will not be at peace within myself.

On the other hand, if I am living in the present moment

and no longer focused on what I or anyone else did in the past

but only concerned about what God is calling me to do right here and right now,

then I will be at peace.

Focusing on the past can keep us from living in the kingdom and so can focusing on the future.

God called Paul to be an Apostle to the Gentiles.

Now if Paul had tried to figure out how to do that on his own,

he would have never have even tried.

He was the person known to be a persecutor of Gentile Christians.

He was the last person in the world they should trust.

And growing a new movement beyond its Jewish origins

was something that had never been done

so there was no roadmap, no guidebook, no set of instructions.

And if anyone knew the risks of being a Christian –

of being beaten, imprisoned, and stoned or crucified –

Paul knew them because he had perpetrated them.

If Paul had focused on the future, he could never have accomplished what he did.

Paul understood that the secret was focusing not on what anyone else might do to him

or what might happen to him.

but focusing solely on what God was calling him to do in the present moment.

It was in that step by step walk of faith,

not remembering what lay behind, not fearing what lay ahead, that he found peace.

And the same thing is true for you and for me.
It is when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit
and we live in that moment-to-moment relationship with God
in which we are trusting God with each and every step that we take
that we find a peace that is beyond understanding.

That's the first step:
to have found peace in our own relationship with God
through having experienced such endless love and the boundless power for ourselves
that it totally transforms our minds and hearts and souls and bodies.
And the next step happens because of that inner transformation.

Once that inner transformation happens,
we are able to do what Paul exhorts us to do in our reading today from Romans:
*"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement
grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus."*

Once each of us is at peace with God, we will be able to live in harmony in order to do 2 things:
Together with one voice we'll be able to *glorify the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,*
And we'll be able to *welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us*
in order that those who don't know God might come to know him and glorify him.

In other words, our purpose is twofold:
to give glory to God ourselves and to bring all the world to give glory to God as well.

Do you remember this song, "let there be peace on earth"?
Well, it contains a great truth.
We can do nothing to bring peace on earth until we have peace within ourselves:
"Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."
But we can't manufacture that peace in our own lives.

Peace is a gift from God that we receive when we enter into relationship with God.
Peace is a gift that we receive when we step into the kingdom of God right here and right now. Peace is a gift that we receive as we let go
of all the hurt and pain of the past and all of the doubt and fear of the future.
Peace is the gift that we receive when we stop our fighting with others
in order to protect our own ego needs and simply submit our wills to God.
Peace is what receive when we listen to God and do what God asks.

This week let us commit to being candles of peace in the world.

Will you pray with me?

Creator God, you know our every hurt and pain, our every shame and guilt.
Through your own dear Child, Jesus, the Prince of Peace,
heal our hearts, mend our minds, and sanctify our spirits, that we may be reconciled to you.
Take away the painful memories of the past and the fears of failure in the future
that those thoughts and feelings may no longer have control of us.
Teach us that you are the only one in whom we will find true acceptance and belonging.
Pour your peace into us that we may be at peace with you and with ourselves,
loving and trusting you above all others.
Then send us out to share your peace with all the world.
In this second week of Advent, God, let us shine with the light of your peace.
We pray this in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. **Amen**