

## **“FINDING PEACE”**

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 4, 2022

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Every year, when I ask her what she wants for Christmas, my friend Jane says, “World peace.” She’s been asking for the same thing for twenty-some years now, and hasn’t gotten it yet. I had to tell her the other day that it isn’t looking good this year, either.

I will probably send her a card with a “peace on earth” theme. I often choose Christmas cards with doves and a peace message; I guess maybe a part of me shares that wish for peace on earth. But even as I’m putting them in the envelopes, I often feel like the sentiment is a pipe dream – unrealistic, unimaginable even, in our world.

The war in Ukraine continues, but it’s far from the only part of the world where armed conflict is causing unimaginable suffering. And across our own country, children participate in armed shooter drills, places of worship adopt security measures, and people wonder if they should be afraid to go to concerts or clubs or parades. How do we find peace?

Sometimes peace in personal relationships feels just as elusive. Home is not, for everyone, a place of comfort and safety. Perfect understanding and harmony is not constant even in the best and closest relationships. And no matter how patient we are, all of us have people in our lives we find difficult, people with whom we have irreconcilable disagreements, people with whom we are angry, or who are angry with us. How do we find peace?

And the inner peace we all long for is constantly disrupted by worry, obsessing about our failings or disappointments or the to-do list, resentments we can’t let go. We carry within us the conflicts between our different responsibilities, between our convictions and our ability to express them, between the realities of our lives and the hopes we have. How do we find peace?

We know that, despite the enormous costs of war – to all parties – nations and factions won’t just lay down their arms. Greed for land and resources, nationalistic pride, and ethnic hatred are powerful forces; there are real and pressing issues of justice, human rights, and governance that can’t just be set aside in the name of peace. “Peacekeeping” by force has been tried before, but it doesn’t work for long and never feels much like genuine peace to the people upon whom it’s imposed.

In our own lives, we often choose to “keep the peace” by biting our tongues, staying away from certain subjects, avoiding confrontation, putting up with more than we really want to put up with. We may find ourselves hiding our true feelings, compromising our convictions, minimizing our hurts. We pretend that things are ok when they are not. All that sort of thing

will maintain a certain veneer of peacefulness for a while, but eventually it eats away at the peace of your soul. On the other hand, we can also hold on to an illusion of peace by living in denial of the ways our own behavior, or privilege, or rejection of responsibility causes damage to our relationships or our community. There are all kinds of ways to a “pretend peace.”

It’s no wonder we’re inclined to yearn for something that will give us a sense of personal peace. We take ourselves off to sit in some beautiful natural spot, we set up peaceful corners in our home, we put some stress-relieving activities into our routine, we practice deep breaths and try to take care of ourselves. Maybe we avoid over-commitment, or stressful situations, or watching the news. These things can do a lot to help us through challenging days. But stay in that personal, peaceful bubble, and eventually it looks a lot like denial and disengagement from all the not-peaceful realities of our lives and our world. And perhaps not, after all, the true peace we hoped for.

How do we find peace?

The standard Christian answer is that, no matter what is going on around us, we can find peace in God. But I have to say that I don’t find that answer, by itself, entirely satisfying. As I reflected on why, I realized that it kind of comes across as a religious version of that personal, peaceful bubble. Like all the versions of peace that aren’t quite the real thing, it fails to understand that genuine peace is not just the absence of conflict, tension, or disagreement. Peace – the real thing – is about *connections*.

That’s true on every level: Peace in a community or a country or between nations or groups will last only if it’s a peace that is just and fair for everybody. We care about peace with our neighbors when we’re able regard them with compassion, when we take their interests into account, when we want to know them. We build relationships when we are willing to be known. We can only mend a relationship if we’re honest about our part in its brokenness. We find peace within ourselves not by disconnecting from the world but in discerning *how it is that we are meant to be connected*. And to be truly at peace with God is only possible when it’s God’s *presence* we seek, not just favors or a promise of heaven.

I haven’t actually mentioned Isaiah yet 😊 but perhaps you can sense, as I did while I was thinking about this, that Isaiah’s words and images have been in my mind as I’ve been reflecting on what peace is and isn’t. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah gives us one of the most well-known passages in the Hebrew Bible, a vision of what’s referred to as “the peaceable kingdom.”

But a “peaceable kingdom” wasn’t what Isaiah saw when he looked around him, any more than it’s what we see in our world. Isaiah saw his tiny country of Judah under threat from the stronger countries that surrounded it, but also disastrously damaged from within by a series of kings who did not lead with integrity or a concern for justice or for the welfare of the people. He saw his society in collapse, the people living in fear, and (to use his metaphor) the family tree of King David the son of Jesse chopped down to a stump.

But Isaiah's role as a prophet, although it means he has many harsh words and hard truths to speak, isn't to leave his people at the mercy of their fears of never-ending upheaval. He delivers what must have seemed like an impossible hope: From a chopped down stump, a new tree comes. From the place where leaders ignored both God and the needs of the people, a new leader will rise up who is led by the Spirit of God and who listens to the poor and makes decisions that promote justice.

Based on that hope, Isaiah lays out this vision of a peaceable kingdom. It's an extravagant picture he paints, to be sure. Wolf, lamb, cow, lion, child, poisonous snake, all playing happily together. A bit of hyperbole to get everyone's attention, maybe. But don't let that fool you. Isaiah is not promoting a kind of "spiritualized fantasy," to use the words of Walter Brueggeman. It's neither about a personal peace bubble nor a heavenly hope. It's grounded in the real world. It's a vision of a world with enough for all, where all people can "dwell securely." There's that connection between justice and peace, again! Isaiah's vision imagines harmony restored, an end to violence and destruction. It pictures (again in Brueggeman's words) human beings "fully immersed in the wondrous mystery that is Yahweh [and] the overcoming of every distance between Yahweh and Yahweh's cared for creature[s]." (p. 480) The vision extends beyond the people of Judah to the whole human community, and beyond that: whatever is amiss in the whole of creation will be restored and made whole again. (Brueggeman, p. 549)

The word from God that Isaiah brings is that even from what seems like death, God can coax new life. Even at what looks like the end, God can open a new way. And in God's way, everyone and everything is connected in peaceful, life-giving, relationship.

As Christians, we hear Isaiah's words and we see Jesus. For us, he is that way. He is the one who fulfills that hope for a leader who will lead with faithfulness and fairness and compassion. We believe that Jesus, on whom the spirit of the Lord rested, whose life lets us see God, whose grace is for all, who said, "the kingdom of God is at hand," calls and leads us into that peaceable kingdom. Asks us to believe it. Welcome it. Trust it. Live in it. Make it real in our actions and words and commitments.

I don't know exactly how we find that peaceful way, in our world or in our relationships or with ourselves. I don't know that any "how-to" is possible. I do believe that the grace and presence of Christ helps those who believe in God's reign of peace to have a measure of peace even in the most threatening circumstances, even toward the people we are most separated from, even when our own spirits are in turmoil – not by isolating us in an illusion of security but by making us deeply aware of our connectedness. Perhaps that's it; that peace begins to come with the knowledge that we and all people and creatures and the earth itself are held together by God. I think this might be what enabled the medieval English mystic Julian of Norwich to say, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

In Adult Ed a few weeks ago, we looked at some of the well-known "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings of the early American artist Edward Hicks. These paintings include the lion, lamb,

child, and snake from our text - alongside scenes from Hicks's own time and from the colonial era. Hicks, who was a Quaker preacher as well as a sign painter and artist, was obsessed with Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom. He was no more a rosy optimist than Isaiah himself; he'd seen the peace treaties with the Lenape and other tribes broken by the white colonists; he was deeply disappointed by divisions within his Quaker community. But the vision continued to beckon to him. He painted it over and over again, according to some sources more than 60 times. I wonder if it was his way of finding, perhaps not perfect peace, but the *vision* – reclaiming it, owning it, praying for it, discerning its wisdom for his time, letting it take shape in him, allowing it to become more and more of his identity, as the years went on.

What if we could find a similar way into the peaceable kingdom ourselves? Some practice, some commitment, some angle of study, some metaphor, some engagement with the world that could help us embrace and hold and live in the vision of God's peaceful reign? To help us see what it might look like in our lives and in our world. What if we were to care enough about the vision of peace to paint it, write it, speak it, sing it, build it, imagine it, over and over again ... to eat, sleep, and breathe it ... not until we find God's peace, but until it finds us.

Resources:

Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament*