

<Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Matthew 3:1-12>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

The Pevensie children, in Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, want peace. It's glossed over quickly in the first sentences of the opening paragraph of the book, so it could be hard to see the connection, but their adventures in Narnia begin because they are first evacuated, without parents, to the rural home of a man they had never met before. Why? Because their own home in London was no longer safe. The Blitz of the early World War II years had created an atmosphere in London which necessitated the evacuation of children from almost every household to rural outliers where they might be safe, even if their schooling, their home life, and even their family connections were upended. It was against this backdrop, this reality that Lewis actually begins his tale of the adventures of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. To say that the Pevensie children want peace is, perhaps, an understatement; their entire world and understanding has been disrupted and turned on its ear.

Peace - frequently understood as the general sense of well-being, contentment, and lack of stress or anxiety - is something many of us yearn for, especially as we move into December and deeper into Advent. Certainly the need for it is real and present; it's one of the reasons Lewis opens his story with such a state, because it would elicit such connection and familiarity with the reader. We are a world, a people, in need of peace.

And in the month of December, in the season of Advent, that desire for peace often becomes much more imminent. We think fondly of carols and soft candlelight. Our memories conjure images of sedate, snowy mornings with coffee and a good book, of coziness and comfort. In our desire for peace, our minds create Rockwellian images to meet such longing.

Matthew's gospel, however, brings us a somewhat different situation.

In the wilderness, the voice of John the Baptist cries out, harsh and unrelenting. Not cozy, not comforting, but jarring and abrasive, grabbing the attention of the hearer and refusing to let it go with out shaking it to awareness. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near! Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight his paths!" And then, especially to the Pharisees and Sadducees who perhaps need to hear something even more, "You brood of vipers!"

No, it seems that the Second Sunday of Advent is anything but peaceful, at least in the ways we envision and imagine it.

It would, perhaps, be helpful if we view John with some of the association and understanding that he might have had from his original audience, because there are at least two associations they would readily make that we might not. But the way John is dressed, and the location in which he is preaching, elicit two such connections to the people who are journeying from around the region to come and hear him. First, in his dress, he would be alike to the prophet Elijah, who likewise was described as wearing camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. As to location, John would elicit thoughts of Joshua, who led the people of God in the final stage of their exodus from Egypt, their journey toward being God's people, by leading them across the Jordan at roughly the same spot.

And in both instances, the association is that of the people of God living more fully into the relationship they are called into, and of God drawing closer again to claim the people, to be present - imminently and embodied - in their lives and in the world.

And therein lies the promise of peace that we so desperately yearn to see realized. That in the midst of the world, in the midst of our lives, in the midst of all of it and any of it, God's promise is to draw near and be present among us, among the world. Not in an abstract or theoretical way, not metaphorically, but fully present. Embodied. The promise of the Messiah is the promise of Immanuel, God-With-Us, literally and completely.

John's appearance and approach are like Elijah, who rebuked the king for forgetting God and admonished the people for ignoring the commands and presence of the Divine in their midst. Elijah called the people back to God, reminding them that God has never been truly gone, and restored the people from foreign rule.

John's location is as of Joshua's, at the Jordan River, ushering the people into a new land, a hoped-for land, a promised land, and with the land, a new sense of identity and existential peace. The days have come again; the promise has come anew.

Isaiah, likewise, would remind the people of the peace that comes with such a Divine promise. For a people that faced invasion, conquer, and exile, who faced the upheaval of identity and livelihood, who faced the uncertainty of the future, the hope of peace seems far off. Much like Pevensie children, and all the real children of England in those days, the very idea of a return to what was familiar, known, and comforting, the return to living with their families, the peace their spirits longed for, seemed far off and unattainable.

But Isaiah speaks of something new, something more: the realization of the fullest of these hopes and dreams: a king, of the true lineage, who would reign justly and righteously. The restoration of the poor and the removal of the wicked. Predator and prey living alongside one another and showcasing a new reality, a new world order on God's holy mountain.

Given the state of affairs the people of God faced, it was perhaps not what they initially envisioned or dreamed of, not quit what they desired. But it was what they needed.

How many times, in your lives, have you not received what you wanted but instead found what you needed?

The Pevensie children, finding themselves in Narnia, face an unending winter, a perpetual lack of peace. And, they find, the time is approaching when a new thing, a new and hoped-for, longed-for reality, is coming into being. Not because they arrived, and not because a battle will be fought. But because *Aslan* has arrived. The One who is promised is now present and walking amongst them.

Such is the case with promise of God; that the peace we yearn for is to be realized by the full, embodied presence of God, even when that appears to be different than what we envision. It may not always be what we want, but it is what we need. In this season of Advent, do we trust God to meet such a need? Coming into the world, fully embodied, through a newborn child, a scion of hope and potential as yet unrealized? Can such a thing truly be possible? Our faith reminds us that it is not just possible, but with God it is even probable.

In the face of the needs of the world, God's response is that of presence, fully and justly.

And in the call of John, our response, in turn, is to repent, or rather, to return - return to God, return to right living with one another, return to the vision that sparked our hearts and spirits with life in the first place. The peace that we so dearly desire is found in returning to the God who is fully present, embodied among us.

The gift of God, knowing our great need - global, communal, individual - is to come in the fullness of divine presence and journey alongside us, accompanying and supporting us. Not simply being with us, but providing the fullest example of how we may live just and holy lives.

God's gift is the gift of justice and righteousness that our world so desperately longs to see realized.

With the promise of this gift also comes the invitation: to repent and live anew as God's holy people. Are we ready to receive this invitation, and to live into it? How might we embody the promise of peace we receive, living out God's presence, God's Kingdom in the world? As we move through this Advent season, as we light our candles and prepare to come again to the manger, may we turn and return to God, as well, and be led into the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*