

December 8, 2019 Advent 2 a VA Syn Isaiah 11:1-10 Romans 15:4-13 Matthew 3:1-12

As I read through the scriptures for today, what caught my attention is the vision of peace in today's first lesson. Isaiah said things like, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." He went on to say that infants and toddlers will play safely near the homes of poisonous snakes.

It is nearly impossible for me to imagine this kind of a world. There is a reason why wolves eat lambs. That's how wolves were made to survive.

So much violence is hard-wired into the natural order of our creation. It's also hard-wired into our human nature, as we see most clearly violent crimes and in war after war after war, as nations fight to survive and thrive.

For over 25 years, we've been involved in wars and terrorist attacks. The euphoria that came with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was followed all so quickly by Gulf War 1, 9/11/01, and more wars the Middle East and elsewhere. Ours is not a time when wolves live peacefully with lambs. Ours is a time when violence opposes violence in so many places in our own country and around the world.

Despite all of this, we hear Isaiah foretell a time of true peace that the Messiah shall bring. And I say, "Lord come soon."

But I remember what actually happened when the Messiah did come the first time. Then the wolves killed the Lamb of God. Then God the Son personally felt what it's like to suffer violence from men of war.

So, what are we to make of Isaiah's prophecy? How should it guide our lives in a time of violence? Or do we just write it off as an irrelevant fairy-tale about a far distant future?

To begin with, the age of peace is what the Messiah shall bring when he comes

again. It's not what we violent creatures achieve by our will, skill, knowledge, or technology. It's a divine peace that transforms nature in general and human nature in particular.

At the heart of the New Testament is a very stubborn hope that Jesus shall come again to bring a new heaven and a new earth where death shall be no more. His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are not the end of his story. Rather, as his resurrection conquered his own death, so his coming again shall conquer death for us and for all creation. That's a Gospel promise.

I cannot ever get 9/11/01 and so many other acts of violence completely out of my mind. Still, I can think of that day when the Lord who once died as a victim of violence shall come again and wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Our mission as the church is to witness to this promise of peace for the whole world. This witness involves us making this peace personal.

That's where today's second lesson fits in. Paul was concerned about how Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were getting along. As you probably know, Jews and Gentiles hated each other intensely and bitterly, even more than certain political groups hate each other in our own country today. When Jews and Gentiles became Christians together, they brought their history of hatred into the church. Each side thought that they had good reasons to keep fighting over basic issues of right and wrong.

Paul may have thought that it would have been easier to get wolves and lambs to co-exist than to get Jewish and Gentile Christians to get along in the same church. But Paul called these two ethnic groups to focus together on Jesus Christ.

Jesus welcomes both Jew and Gentile into God's Kingdom. So, Paul challenged Jewish and Gentile Christians to love each other for the sake of the Lord who loves them all. For Jesus Christ is at the center of their relationship with each other.

The mission of the church involves us enacting the peace of Christ, especially with fellow believers. We may be different in so many ways, and there may be valid reasons for our current religious divisions. Yet we still are one in our Baptism, one in our Lord, and one in our hope.

If the world doesn't see that we believers practice God's peace with each other, then how much harder is it for the world believe that our Lord shall bring peace to all the earth? If we don't let the Lord's love flow through our hearts to this world, then how much harder is it for this world to trust in the love of our Lord?

To recap, the promise of Isaiah shall be fulfilled when Jesus comes again in glory, and the fulfillment of his promise is beginning now. This fulfillment grows when the Holy Spirit moves us Christians to do the deeds of peace in the world and especially in the church. Like the first flowers of spring, this beginning is our witness to what our Lord finally shall do for all creation.

So, this promise of God's peace challenges us to repent now. In those moments when I am most honest with myself, I know that there are times when I'm not at peace with some people because I just don't want to be, at least not enough.

Sometimes, it really is the other guy's fault, at least mostly, as I sincerely tell myself, for good reason. But I know that there are so many times when a big part of the problem is that I am far too willful, too angry, or too unforgiving. There are times when my worst self comes out, even though I may not realize it until my temper has cooled

and my thinking has become clearer.

If I really want God to bring peace on earth, I can ask God to change me every day. I can pray that God cleanse my own heart of those things that contribute to unnecessary conflict. I can pray that God cleanse my own heart of the ways that I don't trust my Lord enough to share his peace with others.

I'm far too sinful to make myself into a man of peace. But I can pray that God channel his love and his peace through me, and I can act on what I pray.

Until the second coming actually does arrive, I believe that there will continue to be tragic times when some Christians have the God-given responsibility to use deadly force in order to protect the powerless and to limit evil. Especially when we are in such a violent time, we can still look forward to that day when the Lamb of God shall bring a new day of peace. We can witness to our Lord's peace in our own lives by how we treat each other in the church and by how we share his love in the world. We can repent every day of the ways that we resist the peace of God, and we can ask our Lord to transform us to become instruments of his peace wherever we may be.

As God leads us to do these things, then just maybe a little bit more of Isaiah's vision actually may happen even to us, even today, and especially to fellow believers. Amen.

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