

Building True Peace

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[Isaiah 11:1-10](#), Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Today is the Second Sunday in Advent and on this day we traditionally light the candle of peace. And that is why it seems so fitting that we should read a passage from the Book of Isaiah which puts forth an amazing vision of world peace: **“The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them... 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.”**

Our Usual Focus

Think about what that is saying. When we talk about peace, we usually focus on ending human conflict. We think of negotiating some sort of cease-fire or even a peace treaty between, say, Russia and Ukraine. We’ll talk about settling things like labour strife by negotiating an end to strikes or job actions.

Or, on a much more personal level, when we talk about peace, we think about eliminating all sorts of conflicts from our life. When no one is arguing or doing things that are upsetting everybody else, when everyone appears to be getting along, we call that peace.

A Cosmic Peace

But isn’t it interesting to see how the vision of peace we get in the Bible goes so much further? Any peace that is able to be found in the human sphere apparently overflows humanity to infect the whole of creation. And so, we see natural enemies like wolves and lambs and leopards and kids lying down in safety. Even the longstanding enmity between legless reptiles and humanity is apparently set aside and it is suddenly safe for children to play around poisonous snakes without fear.

I think this is saying something very powerful. It is saying that peace is about more than simply human concerns, that it is about healing and wholeness for the whole of creation.

You may have heard that the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. But what you might not know is that shalom doesn’t just mean that there are no hostilities. It comes from a Hebrew root that refers to peace, but also harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. Shalom means all of that. It is about the whole universe coming together to find purpose, meaning and completeness.

The Peace we Need

And that, my friends, is very much the kind of peace that we are desperately in need of in our



world today. It is true that many different kinds of conflict are raging in our world today – a war in Ukraine, riots and dissent in Iran and China, labour battles here in Canada. There is also a great deal of tension over issues concerning the environment, the wealth gap and more in society.

On a personal level, I know that many people are dealing with enormous stresses in their lives that make everything feel anything but peaceful. So, isn't it about time to create the peace that heals the whole world?

Starts with a Shoot

And, fortunately, our reading from Isaiah tells us about how such an ideal state of peace can be established. It all starts with a shoot. **“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”**

Now, Jesse is the name of the father of King David. So, if a shoot is growing from the stump of Jesse, what that means is that somehow the house of King David has been going through some hard times. It has been, in some sense, cut off. It's hard to know exactly what this is meant to refer to, but I assume what it means is that the prophet has been somewhat disappointed with the kings of the House of David when he gives this prophecy. He feels as if the main tree of David's line has been cut down in some sense.

A Different Kind of King

But, he says, this new shoot – a new and different kind of king – is about to burst out of the wreck of the Davidic royal line. And when this ruler comes, he will bring about the incredible reign of peace that is described in this passage.

And who is this shoot of Jesse? Most Christian readers will say that it is an obvious reference to Jesus, the Christ. That's probably not who the prophet initially thought that he was talking about. He was probably very hopeful that such a child would be born to the House of David in his own day.

But there is something about this figure that he imagines that transcends expectations about what an ordinary political figure can accomplish. It's not at all surprising that this passage became associated with the idea of a coming Messiah.

How Peace Can be Achieved

For it is this shoot who will accomplish the incredible peace that is described. And the very important question is how will he accomplish that. Because I'm going to tell you how we often assume that peace is made. As I said before, we often work from a definition of peace that sees it simply as a lack of conflict.

In international affairs, this is often achieved by placating, in some sense, the most powerful actors. For example, after Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, you might say that a certain peace was achieved when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. The powerful, belligerent Russia was placated and so there were no more open hostilities between Russia and Ukraine for many years. We often call that peace in this world.

Problems with how we do it

And you probably see the problems with that practice of peacemaking. One of the biggest ones being that it obviously didn't last. And this year Russia came back looking for more territory, seeking initially to annex the whole of Ukraine and plunging Europe and the whole world a lot closer to the dangerous precipice of open war. So, was that armistice in 2014 really peace? I don't think so, but it is often the only peace we feel we can hope for.

This is not just true of international matters either, by the way. I think this is something that we often do in our personal lives. Because we operate on this idea that peace is a lack of conflict, many of us have dedicated ourselves to avoiding conflict in our lives at all costs. But avoiding conflict is not the same thing as embracing peace.

I sometimes catch myself doing this and I'll bet you do too. When you know that a certain topic is going to lead to an argument, you just avoid that topic. When you see someone and you know they will have a complaint or be upset with you, you just avoid talking to them. When things get heated, you change the subject of conversation or maybe even just leave the room.

More than Avoiding Conflict

These are all methods of avoiding conflict, and there are certainly times when they can be useful strategies, but never make the mistake of thinking when you are doing such things that you are creating genuine peace. For that, let us look instead to the example of this shoot of Jesse and what he does in order to bring about the extraordinary peace that is described in our passage.

“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.” This is, of course, the classic image of blind justice. It is why the most common image for justice even today is a woman holding scales and wearing a blindfold. It is a powerful image that means that justice must be administered in a way that is fair.

Justice wears a blindfold so that she is not influenced by the race or wealth or power or standing of the people who come before her. If she were to look at these things, she would decide in favour of the powerful and important. But instead, she must decide what is right.

The Shoot of Jesse's Justice

Of course, when we are oriented towards a peace that is merely a lack of conflict, this is exactly what we are not going to do. The easiest way to avoid conflict is to allow the powerful or the noisy people to get away with whatever they want. The shoot of Jesse intentionally does not look at any of these things and so administers a justice that is untainted. So equal justice is essential to the creation of true and lasting peace.

But that is not the whole story. The shoot of Jesse actually goes further than to administer equal justice. Isaiah goes on to say this: **“But with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed 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.”**

This does suggest more than equal blind justice. For we are told that he judges *for* the poor and decides *for* the oppressed. He also seemingly takes into account the wickedness of those he judges and not just the case that they have.

Playing Favourites?

In some ways, this would appear to be a contradiction against the blind justice that has just been described. The shoot of Jesse is playing favourites! But I would suggest to you that what is being described here is a deeper commitment to equal justice.

It is a recognition that, if people are poor or oppressed, it is often because they have many invisible forces working against them. It recognizes that there are structures in society that keep people in poverty no matter how hard they might work as individuals. It recognizes that subtle racism or sexism or other prejudices can be at work to keep people in situations where they are oppressed or prevented from flourishing. It suggests a justice that seeks to redress such deep underlying issues.

Getting the Balance Right

And obviously it can be very difficult to strike a balance between dispensing equal justice to all and seeking to address structural injustices that are bigger than the individual cases that may come up. I don't think any nation has ever managed to get that balance quite right.

But Isaiah suggests that the shoot of Jesse does. He refers to the blindness of justice first so that suggests that we must strive to serve equal justice first. And yet, in that priority, we must still find ways to create justice *for* the poor and oppressed.

The care we need to take to create a system that balances all of that out is something that we will need to constantly work on, but the overall principle that is at stake should not be missed. This passage is about the creation of the kind of justice that leads to peace in this world.

Building True Peace

And, yes, perhaps the ultimate peace that it describes will elude humanity – at least until Christ shall come. But that should not prevent us from getting as close to that peace as we humanly can. And the message of this passage is clear. If we aspire to achieve such peace, we cannot settle for merely avoiding conflict.

Conflict is sometimes unavoidable if you are going to do what is right. It is certainly going to be inevitable sometimes when you are standing up for a person in the minority or someone who is marginalized. You will have to enter into conflict of some sort if you are going to resist someone who is determined to exploit or oppress others.

Now all of that might not feel very peaceful. Sometimes making sure that what is right and just is done can feel very much like the opposite of peace. But remember always what the goal is. The goal is not just to avoid conflict but to create shalom which includes harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility for the entire universe.

None of that can happen without justice and fairness for all. And that is something that is worth struggling for.