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Rev. Curran Reichert

“Peace Can’t Wait” Isaiah 11:1-10

Let’s begin with a quick review; this is the second week of Advent and a new liturgical year for the Christian church began last week. We are in year A of the lectionary cycle which means we are focusing on the Gospel according to Mathew for next twelve months. Yet, here we are two weeks in and we do not see a passage from Mathew this morning, but another passage from Isaiah. Can anyone remember why that is?

It is because Mathew felt strongly that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise God had made to the Jews that a messiah would come to liberate the tribes of Israel. Believing Jesus to be that liberator, Christians begin this new season by retelling the prophecies of the Hebrew people in order to remember God’s vision of liberation.

This passage from the book of the Isaiah predicts that there will spring forth from the painful history of exile and destruction a brighter day for the followers of Yahweh. Isaiah speaks about a future in which God’s spirit will rest upon the ruler of God’s people as it once did with David, and when that happens there will be a fundamental reordering of priorities.

It was a time, not so different from our own; when those who cared about the future of the earth understood that to protect her there must be a fundamental reordering of priorities, those who cared about the poor, the prisoners, and the outcast- understood that in order for God’s peace to reign there must be a fundamental reordering of creations priorities.

According to the wisdom of the prophet Isaiah, the new future would be governed by a leader who embodied the best of Israel’s traditions: wisdom and understanding, powerful gifts of elocution and effectiveness in conflict, the ability to govern for the benefit of the poor, while remaining ever faithful and obedient to God. This king would rule the world in such a way that the poor would be treated righteously, the meek given a fair hearing, and the wicked justly punished. So glorious was this new leader they would literally be clothed in righteousness and faithfulness (verse 5). (Source Michael J. Chan Assistant Professor of Old Testament Luther Seminary St. Paul, Minn.)

Mathew, along with the other Gospel authors, believed that Jesus was the leader whom Isaiah had foretold. Only there was a twist, Jesus did not resemble any recognizable version of a king. He did not govern through force, nor did he understand himself as separate from or better than any of God's people. Jesus would instead become understood as a humble expression of the Godself and the very embodiment of equity and justice; unpredictable and at times unruly. For Mathew and for the Christian Church, the coming of Jesus in the form of an innocent child signals a profound reordering of priorities. The birth of Jesus symbolizes the birth of God's peaceable kingdom.

The possibility that Isaiah's words foreshadow the birth of Jesus works to a certain point, but begins to unravel the moment the reader realizes that the vision of liberation Isaiah had was one of total transformation.

While it is true that through the life and ministry of Jesus much was indeed transformed, it is also undeniable that a reordering of priorities is far from complete; wars continue to rage, prisoners are treated unfairly, and vulnerable people struggle without food in their bellies or shelter overhead. The problem with the idea of Jesus as fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy is that Jesus' mission was left fundamentally incomplete.

Longing for the completion of Isaiah's messianic vision of God's kingdom on earth is something Jews and Christians have in common. Together we await a total reordering of priorities nationally and personally.

In our tradition we are again preparing for the birth of the Christ child- we call him by many names; favorites being the Prince of Peace and Light of the World. The Good News is that Christ did indeed bring light and peace to the world by offering new models of living, loving and radical inclusion.

His vision is a source of hope in times of despair, peace in the midst of destruction, and reason to love in the face of so much hatred. But friends what is Good News is also a challenging reality- Jesus' work was left undone and the only way his legacy lives is in and through us.

Jesus was not a failed Messiah, but a very human one and in that truth rests the heart of Christianity. In his living and his dying Jesus taught us that peace cannot afford wait, hope cannot afford wait, justice and love must be embodied this and everyday- there is no time to lose.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which God looks compassion on this world. Teresa of Avila (1515-82)

I often bemoan the fact that Lent, which traditionally begins in February, follows so closely after Christmas. But I think I am starting to understand that we can't have one without the other. The urgency of Christ's message is made all the more clear by his death.

We rehearse the trilogy of birth, death, and resurrection year after year because it reminds us that the birth of the Christ child was a hand off between God and God's people. Knowing how the story goes, means we know where the obligation lives, it lives in us. To think otherwise is to act out a delusion year after year, but if what we are doing is reminding ourselves that we are the future our forebears prayed into being- that is worthy of remembering.

The cycle of birth, death and resurrection reminds us also that we are always beginning again. Just as in our natural environment brings birth, death and resurrection- there is no shame in this cycle. It seems God's vision is dependent on constant re-visioning and we can't have failed by not getting it right the first time if each time we go through it something new emerges, something good, something of the Godself.

This is the gift of our shared history; this is the gift of a repetitive liturgy. Each year we remember our place in the story. We remember that there are things that simple cannot wait. And we are charged go forth from the Godcenter that lives in everyone of us- to be the incarnation of God's peace in the world. What cannot wait, peace cannot wait.
Amen