

Date: Sunday August 30, 2009

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

Title: “Living for Peace”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Isaiah speaks to us anytime we read this message about the power of peace.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): The Still-Speaking God still speaks to us about peace. The news is always good but even better when we will hear it.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Reverend Peter Pangore writes in Daily Devotions about an idea that is unfeasible and improbable. It’s the kind of thing that most everybody supports in principle, but it isn’t the sort of thing that is realistic. Apparently the entire nation of Finland is impractical. Finland has been announcing, and enforcing, Peace on Earth one day of the year since the Middle Ages. There is no way to know if it really works, but it seems to work. At noon on Christmas Eve in the Old Great Square of the city of Turku, Finland’s official Christmas city, a declaration is read. The declaration says:

“Tomorrow, God willing, marks the most gracious feast of the birth of our Lord and Savior, and therefore a general Christmas peace is hereby declared, and all persons are directed to observe this holiday with due reverence and otherwise quietly and peacefully conduct themselves, for whosoever breaks this peace and disturbs the Christmas holiday by any unlawful or improper conduct shall be liable, under aggravating circumstances, to whatever penalty is prescribed by law and

decree for each particular offense or misdemeanor. Finally, all citizens are wished a joyous Christmas holiday.”

A Christmas peace is hereby declared. Wow. It’s absurd; it’s unlikely; it’s fantastic, but wouldn’t it be grand if, on one day each year, we held a world-wide peace. No war. No fighting. Every soldier gets a 24-hour breather of peace. It wouldn’t even have to be on Christmas Day but since we are celebrating Christmas in August, I thought it worth mentioning. It is crazy and flaky, but just imagine (Pangore).

Reverend Pangore’s idea connects with this morning’s passage from the Old Testament; perhaps another crazy and flaky idea. Isaiah is imagining a time of peace. Theologian and UCC member Walter Brueggemann has compared the passage that we have read this morning from the prophet Isaiah to speeches by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who also had a great imagination for peace. But most days our reality is a long way from either prophet’s vision of peace. Today, again, we read Isaiah in the context of war, trying to curtail our war in Iraq, escalating war in Afghanistan, tensions in Pakistan, challenges in Myanmar, a blood bath in Darfur, and violence in our cities, murder is up in KC, innocent people driving down the road and sitting on their front porches are being hit and killed by stray bullets intended for others, workplace and church shootings have increased, and domestic violence continues to be an issue. We see the absence of peace in other ways too. The threat of terrorism makes even peaceful days feel ominous, there seems to be an increasing anger from people toward the government, and there

is damage done to the earth that will be a tragic legacy left to children yet unborn. There are plenty of ideas about peace, but our realities don't match.

It isn't difficult then to imagine how the people of ancient Israel must have felt as they lived with the brutality of oppression, destruction, and exile by one empire after another. They listened to Isaiah's dream, this vision of the future, and then they looked around at their beautiful city, Jerusalem, burned and battered by powers that must have appeared unstoppable. But Isaiah knew and tried to convey to all reading and hearing his words that there was one power stronger than any empire or any force focused on destruction. Today's passage is Isaiah lifting up God's promise of a future very different from what was visible. Isaiah's words are graceful and yet haunting, an expression of our deepest yearnings that we use in our public life as a vision for all God's children. Isaiah's words are engraved on a wall near the headquarters of the United Nations building in New York City, where they might inspire the work of many nations and people from various parts of the world who seek to live together in justice and peace.

We hear this text not only in a time of conflict and war but also on a Sunday in August when we celebrate our vision as we look to the upcoming seasons of Advent and Christmas. Walter Brueggemann says that Advent is an abrupt disruption to our ordinary time, the time of the church year that we are in right now. Advent brings the new-year for the church. During that time, as the rest of the world still focuses on consumer spending, waits on annual reports of sales and profits, the church moves ahead into new time, and undertakes a season of hoping and waiting for

different events. “Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our stale expectations to consider our life afresh in light of new gifts that God is about to give” (Brueggemann). In the new season that Advent offers, we can dare to hope for something much better than the news may report. We can begin remembering who is really in control and setting our hearts on being part of that grand plan. These beautiful words of Isaiah paint a very clear picture; God is the one who brings dreams to reality, but there is work for us to do as well in reshaping the instruments of war, violence, conflict, and destruction into instruments of peace and goodness. That can all happen during Advent. But on this last Sunday of August, I suggest that we don’t have to wait until Advent – we can be living for peace today.

That’s the essence of Isaiah’s work, the ideas of Rev. Dr. King, and the connection between the two – the call to participate in the dreams of peace. My strong belief is that Dr. King expected us to not just sit around waiting for the great day of peace to arrive but to work for it as we wait and as we live. Isaiah also wants us to loosen our grips on our instruments of war and to take up those activities of peace and to “walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5). Now that sounds very nice. But Brueggemann adds there is a catch, “God wills for the world . . . a center of justice and righteousness that will get our minds off our petty agenda and our penchant to protect our little investments” (Brueggemann). I find that idea overwhelming and not very welcoming because the things I value the most I am reluctant to risk or lose which means I am reluctant to share them.” The things of war between the nations are first the things of which we struggle individually.

We might want to claim that the nations can't or won't beat their swords and spears into the things of peace. I had a friend tell me on the phone on Friday that we will never have world peace. Then he added, "Will we?" I replied that someday all of creation will know peace, but it might be awhile. That's because there are too many situations in which we think those weapons of war are still needed. That seems to be our preferred way of settling conflicts.

I was interested while in Israel to listen to representatives of Israel's military talk about the special emphasis they put on humanitarian interests in the middle of war. As I sat and listened to the presentation I was pleased to hear that they were focused on humanitarian efforts, but couldn't help but notice it was all being planned for times of war. They weren't about peace, they were all about war. There are many reasons justifying Israel's commitment to fighting, but it saddened me that they weren't working for humanitarian efforts for peacetime but for wartime.

Still, today's good news is that Isaiah is promising a day when nations will not only delight in God but will also be engaged in God's purpose. That could be a mission statement for any congregation "Delighting in God; Engaging in God's purpose." Isaiah promises a time when God's way will fully shape how we live, not just some of us like those of us gathered here, but every single person upon the face of this earth. It doesn't look like that right now but it can look more like peace today than yesterday, if we will live for peace today.

Like my friend who called, there are many who doubt that seeking peace will be able to turn back the cries and efforts of war. But even the staunchest skeptics

should admit that we have a better chance of lasting peace when we try for peace than when we don't try. Our still-speaking God issues a call for peace. What will we, as people of faith, do to answer that call? One idea is to have that day of peace on Christmas day. August 30 or any other day will work as well. Let's live for peace today and let us pray.

Lord,

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on Earth, the peace that was meant to be. We are all your children so we hope to walk in perfect harmony. Yes, let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now. With every step we take, let this be our solemn vow; to take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me (Chalice Hymnal). Amen.

Offering: As we think about Christmas today, still over three months away, we can be reminded that the money we give today makes a difference three and four months down the road. Let us give as it is given. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless the offering we make this day and multiple it so that it is available to use today, tomorrow, and the days to come. So we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction: Jesus Christ is born and he lives. Go forth with the peace of Christ in your heart, in your lives and in the world. Let this be the day. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

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