

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Tis the season for fantastical readings from Isaiah. Last week we heard a vision about a day to come when the weapons of war will be transformed into garden tools.

“In days to come...(nations) shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks...neither shall they learn war any more.”

Today we heard another of Isaiah’s incredible visions of the Kingdom of God, this time featuring fearsome predators lying down in peace with their prey, and children being safe from nightmarish dangers.

“They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord,” Isaiah says.

Last week I preached about how we can transform these fantastical visions into something small and irrelevant by believing they are only about some distant “someday” in the future, or else mostly about the time long ago when they were first uttered, but the truth is that, if we’re willing to be open to it, these visions are a powerful message for us today. God is speaking through Isaiah to inspire our actions and decisions *right now*, so we will be part of bringing the vision to its fulfillment.

Now, I know that for some of us, Isaiah’s visions are too wonderful to have much to do with real life. Maybe weapons will become garden tools one day, we think to ourselves, but who wants to take a chance and not be armed when there are so many dangerous people out there? Predators and prey may one day peacefully coexist, but the last time I watched Animal Planet, lions are still eating lambs. Isaiah sounds nice and all, but he’s talking about something that doesn’t exist, and until the world changes, it would be ridiculous to pretend any of this is real.

So, this morning I want to dig a little deeper into why Isaiah is so important for us to hear, and especially in the season of Advent. There are three things I want to talk about, in hopes that we can hear in Isaiah more than a bedtime story or whimsical poetry, but something God is speaking to us now.

First, in order to embrace these beautiful visions of a peaceful world, you don’t have to pretend that the world is safe. Isaiah’s hope is not a naïve optimism. We can admit with all honesty that the world can be a dangerous and sin-sick place.

We don't have to put our heads in the sand or stop reading the news. This week is the seventh anniversary of Sandy Hook, and if there has ever been an event that tested my faith as a Christian, that was it. And it wasn't just the event itself, as devastatingly awful as it was, it was also the failure of our society to do anything meaningful to prevent it happening again.

Friends, Christian hope is not about pretending we live in a perfect world. We believe God's good and perfect will ultimately will be realized, but it has not yet fully come. Not yet. It is a world we wait for with a deep and sometimes desperate longing. That's the heart of Advent: that the Kingdom of God is somehow now all around us and also not yet fully here. Theologian and writer Christena Cleveland puts it this way:

“We've been tricked by chocolate-filled Advent calendars and blissful Christmas pageants that gloss over the very real evil that makes the Messiah's coming so very necessary, so very loving, and so very heroic. Advent isn't a holiday party. It doesn't pressure us to conjure up a hopeful face, ring bells, and dismiss the foulest realities we face. *Advent isn't about our best world; it's about our worst world.*”¹

And yet our faith is how we resist the temptation to despair. As Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans, followers of Jesus are people of hope, and hope is about believing that what we know now is not the way it will always be. Hope is about trusting that the worst things are not the last things, and the vision of the prophets, as far away as it may seem at times, is where we are ultimately headed. So we can and should be honest about the sin and evil of the world. It's why I like the mantra, “Keep Herod in Christmas,” because it reminds us that the story of our salvation didn't begin in a snow globe or Hallmark Holiday special. It happened in the same broken world we know now, so in Advent, we can hold onto the hopeful visions of Isaiah without pretending the world is something it's not.

Which leads to my second point about hearing Isaiah in Advent, and it's something I touched on last week. We don't have to wait to start living according to the vision of the prophet until the world makes it easy for us. Christians don't wait for the world to change to live according to the rules of the Kingdom. Whether or not the circumstances of the world make it easy for us to live faithfully has no bearing on whether or not we should do what is right...and when we aren't sure what is right, we don't have to look any further than the life of Jesus. He gives us the model upon which we build our lives, and he shows us that the vision of the prophet is not just something we hope for “someday,” but a guide to how we can and should begin to live now. Put another way, we don't have to wait to become people of peace until the world becomes safer. The world will become safer when we choose to be people of peace. We don't have to wait to become people of mercy

¹ <http://www.christenacleveland.com/2014/11/adventdarkness/>

until the world becomes kinder; the world will become kinder when we choose to be people of mercy.

Which brings me to the third thing about listening to Isaiah in Advent. Just because we don't see its flourishing today, doesn't mean it's not coming, because what looks like an end is never an end to God. Just remember how Isaiah begins the vision we heard today: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." God specializes in bringing new life and new possibility from the ruins of human activity and history. The line of King David, the son of the Jesse in the prophesy, was seemingly ended – a family tree that had been cut down. And yet God is able to bring new life from that which seems lifeless.

Frankly, I always just thought of this whole shoot coming from a stump thing as a sweet metaphor until I visited Costa Rica for the first time. As Melody and I drove through the countryside, we began to notice all the growing fences. Landowners would chop down branches from trees and shove them into the ground, but those lifeless posts set new roots and sprout new branches. It's one of the craziest things I've ever seen, driving past miles and miles of living fence posts. "A shoot shall come out the stump," indeed.

The future may seem impossible now because we see so many closed doors, dead ends, and cut off stumps. But that's why we need the message of the prophets all the more in order to remember...dead stumps come alive. And in fact, they are often the root from which life springs. Just because we don't see its flourishing today, doesn't mean it's not coming, because what looks like an end is never an end to God.

So my friends, hold onto the hope of Isaiah. Not in spite of the brokenness of the world, but because of it. Remember, we don't have to pretend things are better than they are to believe this is possible. We don't have to wait for the world to change so we can change, because what we choose to do today is how the vision will become reality. And if you look around and all you see are stumps, remember that we believe in a God who specializes in bringing new life to places that seem lifeless.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.