

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Isaiah 44:6, 9-11; 29:13-16; 55:1-3

John 4:1-26

Peace from the Heart

The countdown begins- four weeks until we will be celebrating one of the most important Christian holy days. And you are probably thinking- there is so much to do! Shopping, cooking, baking, wrapping, decorating and the list continues! We must remember that Christmas is the time when we welcome the Son of God as a baby. Jesus is this baby who was laid in a manger, was proclaimed with joy by angels and through the message of the shepherds who shouted out his birth, this baby changed the world forever. This baby became our Saviour. This baby is the one for whom generations of people had prayed and hoped would come to bring about a totally peace filled world. This peace filled world would be reflective of the prophet Isaiah's words (ch.40) where God's glory will be revealed and everyone will see it. This peace filled world- this peaceable kingdom was what Isaiah wrote about and believed would come if we believe in the one who was yet to come. The prophet wrote about his birth, the gospels tell us the story and through faith His Spirit is present with us now. This Advent season helps us to prepare to hear this story again from the beginning. And so we anticipate Jesus the one whose birth we await in this Advent season.

Our focus this year is on this peaceable kingdom first envisioned by the prophet Isaiah which seems impossible today and yet this peace is made possible knowing that God gives to us His Son through which we each may come to know what it means to have peace.

What does this peaceable kingdom look like? It is a state of harmony among all creatures and especially as prophesied in Isaiah 11. Edward Hicks a painter and coach maker became a Quaker preacher in the early 1800's. He expanded his trade to paint household objects, as well as farm equipment. Eventually he created several easel paintings of what he believed "The Peaceable Kingdom" would be like. He painted over 60 versions of animals and people living in peace. By taking the image of Isaiah 11:6-8 "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together," Hicks' brings the animal world living together in peace. Isaiah's passage also includes more animals who would normally be prey and predator coming together and lying down and content together. Hicks also includes children playing near a cobra and neither one is harmed as they exist together. But why is this vision of Isaiah about peace so important as we begin this season of waiting, this Advent.

It is difficult to imagine this peaceable kingdom as being real. This is because all the news we hear and what we experience is noise, conflict and images of these concerns. Screens everywhere and instant communication cause us to have stress and anxiety. There is real trouble everywhere and it seems that hard work, oppression, suffering, divisions, media attacks, harassment cases, murders, robberies, fire and destruction are in the forefront of what we get to hear and know.

Yet Isaiah calls out to care for others: "comfort my people for they have been forgiven. Comfort them and know that there will come a time when a voice will call in the desert. Get them ready! Get ready! Prepare the way for what is to come. The messiah is on the way! As followers of the Risen Christ how might we claim this time of preparation- how might we prepare again for Jesus' coming? How are you getting ready?"

The Promised One of God according to Isaiah's prophecies was to be of the family of Jesse, a descendent of David. This baby was born not in a palace, but in a stable. At the time of his birth people knew that this baby was different but time had to pass by in order for him to grow up physically and to understand that he is God's Son and he had to fulfill God's promise. Jesus also had to be knowledgeable about the human condition in order to bring about change.

John the Baptist was the one sent by God to be the witness to the light of the Saviour. People would listen to John speak yet he referred to the one who would come after him. John the Baptist knew that he was to teach the people to get ready. In order to be ready for Jesus to teach them, they like us, had to hear the story of prophecy being fulfilled. And just like us they needed to open their hearts to hear the message of hope which would be shared by the One who followed John.

Jesus is the One who would make it possible for the sins of the world to be taken away. And it is through him alone that peace might fully reign in this kingdom on earth. This peace is the one which may be experienced while we worship, pray and while we are engaging in one of those many activities we do in preparing for the celebration of Christmas. But it is up to us to define the kind of peace for which we are searching.

While shopping one might experience peace when you see a child sitting patiently in a stroller or even putting a few coins in the Salvation Army collections. One might look into the eyes of an individual who is next in line at a check out and see peace as he purchases a gift for someone special. One might even experience moments of peace as you decorate cookies at home with children or grandchildren. And what happens when you place certain ornaments or decorations on the tree- memories of past years are shared. Hope for this season of love are left unspoken. And there is peace as the lights are turned on. Peace may also be found in the

singing of a hymn, hearing the familiar words of Jesus' birth or even as you close your eyes for a moment and breathe.

Let us do this now. Let us breathe in and out and as hear John the Baptist's words "Prepare the way of the Lord" echoing in our mind with anxiety, with excitement and even with peace as images of God's creation sitting down as one. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way of the Lord. Lions and lambs; leopards and goats, bears and cows, wolves and sheep, and children and snakes. And in the midst of this gathering on the ground is a child who shall lead them to something new.

When we look at the headlines of world events we wonder if this vision will ever come true. One generation after another have been hoping for this peace. They prayed and waited for the messiah, the Christ to come and when He came, it was not what they thought would happen. Yet as people who believe in Jesus as the messiah we understand him to be the Son of God and upon him God's Spirit rested. This is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and power; the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of God. But do we believe in the peace that Jesus the Promised One, brings and may bring to the world?

As we continue to explore this peaceable kingdom of God do we have hope that he will come to us in different ways? Do we have hope that we will get to know the Prince of Peace as the Son of God who came into the world to shake it up, bring change, comfort those in need, or fill a heart with new possibilities?

How do you experience peace? Today we will share in what Jesus asked us to do to remember him. In these moments we might remember him as the baby in the stable but most likely we remember him breaking the bread; pouring the wine and sharing it with his closest friends a few short hours before he was arrested, tried and sentenced to die. We will remember that he said to do this because of the love we have for him and our response to serve him through and by faith. We do this because Jesus' peace comes from having an open heart and in receiving the Spirit within us. As we eat and drink at this meal let us remember Jesus' as the Prince of Peace and the one upon whom we lay our sins as we seek forgiveness. Let us also remember that God's peaceable kingdom is made possible because of God's deep and everlasting and unconditional love. Come to this table and receive Christ's peace. Come and let us share in God's peaceable kingdom as we strive to know peace within our hearts and lives. Be at peace and know that the Christ in the manger is the Christ of the cross.