

“Toward Peace”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 4, 2016
Second Sunday of Advent

Scripture readings: Matthew 3:1-12 and Isaiah 11:1-10

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”

Matthew 3:1-12

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 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; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek 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. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 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; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Isaiah 11:1-10

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word go forth and do its work in us, with us, and through us in a hurting and broken world. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

At the beginning of the week when it's my turn to preach, I take the Bible passage that I have spaced out like a poem on a piece of paper. I print it out. I lay it on my desk and I begin to read it. I have to my right, a pencil and to my left, a ruler. And as I read through the passage, every now and then I think, oh, this idea stops here. I'll place the ruler and I'll draw a line. And then I'll read a little bit more and think, oh, that stops and I'll draw a line. And then I'll draw another line and then I connect one section to another but basically all throughout my reading, I'm taking that ruler and drawing a line because I want to separate the concepts that are being addressed and make sure that I understand the flow of the passage. Now, as Karen proclaimed in her reading about confessing our sins, I need to confess a little bit of my sinfulness to all of you. Last week during the first Sunday of Advent, as Karen was beginning to offer her sermon, she talked about how Advent is the beginning of the new church year. It's a time to celebrate. We light the candle of hope. And for some reason, inside of me, I took my ruler and my pencil and I drew a line and I stopped listening. I'm sorry. (Karen said "You didn't hear the story I told about you." No, I guess I didn't. But I'll get you back.)

No, I drew the line because just that concept of a new year and starting over captured me. And I thought how amazing it is for us as Christians to have that opportunity where we can take the ruler and the pencil onto the calendar and draw a line and say, you know what? I'm going to start over five weekends before everyone else does on January 1st. I'm going to have the freedom by the gospel and the Spirit to take that ruler and draw that line and say, "Enough. Stop." I don't know about you but every now and then I feel like I'm carrying the burdens of the world on my shoulders and in my soul, and I want to take a line and draw it in the sand and say, "You know what? Enough is enough. I'm going to lay these things down and I'm going to turn towards something new. A new way of being, a new way of hopefulness, a new way of being filled with light and joy." That's where the beginning of her sermon took me. The idea that we get to start again and that we start again with the candle of hope burning bright. The candle of hopefulness, the possibility of light coming into to darkness, and darkness and heaviness and worry and fear and frustration not ever being able to overwhelm the goodness that is ours in Jesus Christ.

So I have this idea of drawing a line with the pencil and the ruler—of having that happen last Sunday during the sermon, thinking about the possibilities to start over—and I have to be honest: given the conversations that Karen and I have been having amongst ourselves and with many of you, it seems like all of us could take a pause, grab a ruler, a pencil and just draw a line. I don't know how many people stopped me on the way out of church on Sunday after the presidential election, and they were afraid of what would happen at their Thanksgiving table. They were afraid whether or not their children or their grandchildren would still accept their presence at the Thanksgiving table, because they had voted for someone other than who their children or grandchildren had wanted to win. It seems like this election has been more divisive than any that either of us can remember. It seems that the power of

the division is insidious and is attacking, in a sense, families and friends at a place that is just beyond our comprehension. We are people of the gospel, good news, and the invitation for us is to try to figure out how is it that we can take this gospel reality into our hearts in order to live our lives as faithful people, even including in those situations where we have enormous differences with those that we're either married to or that we brought into the world or that brought us into the world.

Now I thought it would end a couple weeks after the election. But just this past week as I came to work a congregant was walking through the front door on her way to the Welcome Center and I said simply, "How are you doing?" She kind of gave me a look and I said, "Well, at least there is Christmas coming." Full stop. She looked at me and she said, "Well, I don't know how merry Christmas is going to be this year. I don't even know if we're going to get invited to my daughter's house." *I don't know if I'm going to get invited to my daughter's house.* Because of an election. Because of being on different sides. Because of having a different set of values and principles and ideas about how this country should be governed. Families are having a hard time coming together. Friends are wondering, *Can we still be friends?*

And so what I want to offer is a brief translation of the Isaiah promise in a little bit more today's kind of language. *The Democrat shall live with the Republican, and the Conservative shall lie down with Liberal; the Trump supporter and Hillary supporter and the Libertarian and Green Party all together, and a little child shall lead them.* It seems to me that the promise of Isaiah of drawing together all these elements—wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion and fatling, cow and bear—all of these dichotomies of creatures are drawn together in this promise that they will live in peace and harmony forever. And it seems to me that we can use that in our own lives and realize that whether we are Democrat or Republican, Conservative or Liberal—no matter who we voted for, that underneath it all there is this little child that leads all of us.

One of the beautiful things about this time in the life of our culture is pastoring this congregation, where we have conservatives and liberals, we have Democrat and Republican and Libertarian and Green Party all sitting right here, right now, together. Not divided, but together. Because for a moment we took the ruler and drew the line and created space to breathe and to worship a God who desires that each of us live in peace.

As I was thinking about the invitation of this season and of Christ in our lives, these three biblical stories come to mind and I offer them for your meditation or consideration as you think about how any issue, whether it's the election or something else, has caused divisions between you and someone you care about deeply. We need to remember that as Christians, Jesus came that all people may have life and have it abundantly and that Christ is the Good Shepherd to everyone. We need to remember that he said, "You have heard it said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For it is he who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.'" God shows no bias and neither should we.

And finally, the story of Jesus in the boat with his disciples. In the Gospel of Mark it says, *A great windstorm arose and the waves beat into the boat so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'* Teacher do you not care that I am divided from my children or my parents? Do you not care that my friends are no longer talking to me? Teacher, do you not care that I'm hurting and wondering if I'll be invited to the Christmas table? *And Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still.'* Then the wind ceased and there was dead calm. Peace, be still. Amen.