

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Let Us Seek A New Thing”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, December 8, 2019

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’; and again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’; and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’ 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.

Isaiah 11:1-11

*A shoot shall come out from the stock 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.
On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros,
from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us your Word, the living word, so open our hearts and our minds to how these words speak to us and the words you have placed on my heart so that together we continue on the journey of Advent so that we may arrive at Bethlehem. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

This morning's passage from Isaiah is one that always intrigues me. The prophet describes a world where things are turned upside down. Animals that are normally adversaries appear to live in harmony side by side and a child plays near a snake hole, which is unnerving. A very different view of the world and how it works. The other part that intrigues me is the shoot coming from the stump of Jesse that comes forth out of a tree which appears to be dead.

That image, in particular, evoked a powerful memory from my days serving at Second Presbyterian Church and two of you from Second are here today, so that's kind of amazing [laughter]. But in that congregation, like this one, Advent and Christmas brought out creativity and beauty and decorating for the season. So one year, the committee working on decorations decided to create a veritable forest of trees in the chancel. A member of the church invited them to come to their farm to gather trees from their woods and so a caravan of trucks and vans came back with a great selection, some evergreens, some bare branch small trees that were likely not going to blossom again, and some to be covered in lights, and they created a wonderland forest in the chapel. All the trees were beautiful, even the ones that were dying, for their branches made beautiful and delicate shadows on the wall because of the light shining from above. But over those next weeks, something unusual happened. One of the trees that looked bare and barren had suddenly grown something out of a fork in its branches. I think we were all touched by this living representation so to speak of the stump of Jesse and the shoot, the shoot coming out of dark bark, new life coming out of death. For it was symbolic of the season in so many ways. And so these words from Isaiah always evoke that memory, and that time, witnessing the shoot that came to be, a reminder of life coming forth from death and light in the midst of darkness. And I think that is, in part, the power of waiting for Christmas.

I think indeed, this year in particular, we are full of hope and anticipation of what this holy season can mean for us and to us. The end of the year is approaching and it hasn't been the easiest year for many, and for some, anxieties are strong. Add that in our part of the world, the darkness grows longer and eclipses the light of day by a few minutes each day. So in the midst of this time, we're invited to anticipate and prepare to trust in the coming of the light again and to see things anew.

I think that so much sums up the words of the prophets throughout scripture. They speak into times of darkness and despair with an invitation to people to look anew by offering words of hope. But they're not just simple words. They're far more profound than, "Don't worry, be happy. In time, it will get better." The prophets call people to be renewed, to go back to the roots of their faith. In the midst of loss and change, they are reminded of their call to be people of compassion and mercy, to care for those in need, the sojourner, the lost, the immigrant, the stranger, the hungry, and the sick. To remember that they are to be those who seek and work for peace of mind and heart, not just for themselves, but for everyone. Their faith is not just for them, but something that can grow and strengthen only when we are willing to serve others. So Isaiah paints his image by speaking of the stump of a tree, a harsh image of a light tree being hacked down with just a little bit left. It is very likely that the stump represents the people of Israel who have been defeated by the Assyrians. They are no longer free. Isaiah offered words of promise that new life will come forth, a new leader will reign bringing in harmony.

So hope may be illusive, but not lost. Isaiah's words of hope and peace are the very symbols of our advent candles this morning and his words tell us of another way of living in the world. To have a willingness to consider the ways of reconciliation among enemies, a way of overcoming our tendencies towards power and domination, an invitation to sit side by side with those we might never want to be near. And to make his point, Isaiah draws an image of animals that is contrary to what we expect.

A video from YouTube I saw last week brought this to light in a very profound way. It was of a cat parading around with a mouse in its mouth. Now, I don't know about you, but I know my cat growing up, every time she did something like that, she brought it to us and wanted us to clap our hands and say, "Good job." This, though, was off kilter. The cat had the mouse in its mouth and was moving across the room but not towards anyone. This cat was bringing the mouse to the feeding dish. The cat wasn't planning to eat the mouse, rather, the cat dropped the mouse, making sure that the mouse ate side-by-side with him. So much for natural instincts.

So the words of Isaiah speak of a world out of kilter, images that seem unlikely and out of character. A wolf living side-by-side with a lamb, the leopard lying down with a kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. A radically different view of the world. What struck me this time, though, is that neither is destroyed. One does not vanquish the other. They essentially learn to be civil, accept one another, and live side by side.

So the images drawn by Isaiah are prophetic. A call to action, to live faith with love and create a different kind of world. For if we are willing to see things differently and accept differences, we can live side-by-side with others and help to change the world. But if we're honest, we know our instincts don't always go that way. Power breeds a desire for more power. Wealth for more wealth. Fear feeds a desire to keep insiders safe and protected at all cost. So into this challenge, Isaiah speaks of a new way of living. That if we work for peace, it can change relationships, whether between nations, among differing peoples, or within families. And he tells them and us that a descendant of David, the son of Jesse, will come a shoot, someone who will lead them. A little child will lead them. And no doubt, this is the reason that we read this passage at Advent. A shoot coming from the stump of Jesse as part of the line of David can easily be interpreted as imagery for the coming of the baby Jesus. But not all scholars agree on this interpretation. Others see it as a description of a time of peace and harmony, a restoration of the garden of Eden.

Regardless, I think either image fits. And the call to a sense of peace and harmony still reigns. And this image has a power to remind us of all the ways the unexpected ones can bring about change. That it is possible for enemies to learn to sit down at the table with one another. After all, the Berlin wall came down, and I don't think any of us had ever expected that. There are those who are powerful, who need to remember that just because you can gobble up the weak doesn't mean you should. That while the older can often be wiser, that children can lead us too, just like Wyatt did today by sharing his answer, thank you, sir.

And that is the world anew. To be open to what one child can bring us to reminds us of the courage of someone like Greta Thunberg, the young Earth climate activist, who calls us out for our treatment of the Earth. Or for Laila, the best cheerleader the St. Louis Blues could ever have, who fights a disease with great courage. Or any new baby who evokes feelings of awe and wonder. I think that is why the coming of the baby Jesus evokes awe and wonder into our hearts. That in our own lives, we know there are times when a child will lead us to see things anew.

And as I reflected on this, I found myself thinking of the new movie about Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers is a big part of this movie, but it's really centered around someone named Lloyd Voegel. And in fact, is based on a true story about a man who Mr. Rogers came to know through his work. When the movie opens, we find out that Lloyd is a journalist. No one wants interviews with him anymore. His writing is powerful, but it's become very hard-edged. He interviews well, but he digs so deep as though he's trying to find the dark side of everyone, and so as a result his articles are harsh and unyielding. The word is out, and no one wants to be interviewed by him anymore. Except, it appears, Mr. Rogers. And we find out soon that it's not because he wanted the exposure and publicity, he had read all the articles that Lloyd had written, and he knew that Lloyd was a man that was not at peace. He wanted to talk with him and offer him a way to let go of whatever anger it was that was eating at him. And so Mr. Rogers lives out his faith through the gift of presence, his ability to ask the right questions, and his willingness to listen.

We find Lloyd is a brand new father struggling to find his way into a new role of being parent. But one of the reasons he's having difficulty is because his relationship with his own father is precarious. Lloyd's father left the family when he was young and the two had really not been in touch for years. But Mr. Rogers gently prods and pokes with questions. At first, Lloyd finds him both irritating and annoying. Mr. Rogers keeps asking him about his son and wife and he's thinking, "I'm here to interview you, not you me." So Mr. Rogers calls his wife and talks with her and realizes that Lloyd has been burying himself in his work to avoid the struggles he's dealing with, and he's also leaving his wife and son home alone a lot more than they're happy about. But Mr. Rogers realizes that it's because of Lloyd's fractured relationship with his own father that Lloyd isn't sure how to be a father himself. He loves his son but he doesn't know how to express it. Mr. Rogers keeps on pushing and finally, something shifts. Lloyd goes to see his father. And as they talk back and forth, over time, things change. And Lloyd begins to be able to let go of the anger and judgment that has eaten him alive for so long, and he's able to consider another way. It's not a Hollywood ending, but an honest one of rebuilding relationships, precarious as they may be, and reminding us that the relationships and connections with family and friends have the power to shape our whole lives. This, in turn, enables Lloyd to open his eyes and his heart to his own son. For Lloyd, a little child leads him to learn about love and life in a profound new way.

Advent invites us to realize that hope and peace are not just pie in the sky ideas that will never happen. They are aspects of faith that we should always aspire to. Aspects of faith we should work for and seek in our daily lives. Advent is a reminder that even in the darkness, new things are possible and that unlikely ones can lead us and teach us something new. This is the holy season when we yearn and hope for the best. So may we all invite the spirit in to prepare and shape us anew in the name of the one we call Emmanuel, who is God with us. For this is the Holy Child we sing about with yearning, the one whom we say that all "the hopes and fears of all the years will come to rest in him" on that Holy night and beyond. Amen.