

Peace in Our Midst

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Isaiah 11:1-9 NIV

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him —
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord —
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Matthew 18:10-19 RSV

See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

I don't need to remind you that we live today in a violent world. Since the end of World War II, there has hardly been a year when there wasn't a war going on somewhere on this globe. Our own nation has seen its share of violence, since the attack of September 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It's reported now that November was the most deadly month for American fighters since the

beginning of the Iraq war. The struggle between Israelis and Palestinians continues to take its toll, not to mention the conflict in the Sudan, which has driven millions of people from their homes. Somalia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, Viet Nam — these are only a few from a catalog of nations whose names seem almost synonymous with conflict, violence and destruction. Tribal groups, nations, religions, political ideologies vie with one another for control and domination, and violence — horrible violence — is the usual result. It has been calculated that more Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries put together.

We're no strangers to violence within our own borders. One never knows where it will flare up next. Six people were buried in Wisconsin last week as a result of a dispute over deer hunting. It was safer for the deer in those woods than for people. The news reports each morning chronicle the latest overnight murders. Family violence seems to head the list, as angry fathers murder their wives and children — or angry children murder their parents. There's no peace today in millions of American homes, as wills and values clash and personalities brush up against one another. There's no peace even for the unborn, no longer secure in their mother's womb but liable to be ripped from that comforting shelter with the sanction of a culture that mandates personal choice at all costs. In this world, peace is at a premium.

It was no different in the ancient world. Alexander the Great used ruthless means to subdue the nations of the ancient Near East. The struggle for power within the Roman Empire led to the murder of Julius Caesar, and countless others after him. The Bible, itself, is filled with chronicles of violence between nations and tribes, between rivals for power and influence, between believers in the Lord and the worshipers of false gods. Family violence is there on the Bible's pages as well; one has only to read the story of the family of David to see it. In the time of Jesus' birth, a jealous King Herod had several of his wives and sons murdered, and the gospels tell of his massacre of innocent children in the effort to stamp out what he perceived as a threat to his authority.

In such a world of violence, it's no wonder that the prophets of Israel longed for one who would bring peace to their troubled world. The nation of Judah lived under a constant threat from powerful neighbors. Peace would never come just by default. It would take a great leader to bring it about — a leader who could rule the nation with justice, whose wisdom could strengthen it against its enemies. Whenever a new king came to the throne of David, hopes were high that this king would be the one — the *anointed one* of God, or Messiah — who could make the nation prosperous and secure its peace. It was perhaps at such a time, the coronation of a new young ruler, that Isaiah gave us the vision of the "Prince of peace":

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7).

Today we understand that Isaiah was looking ahead to Jesus Christ. Those who first heard Isaiah's words may have been thinking of a newly crowned ruler of their own day, perhaps King Hezekiah. But Hezekiah, though a good king, wasn't good enough to be God's Messiah. He couldn't bring the peace for which the prophets hoped. No king who ascended to the throne of David was ever able to ensure peace for God's people — because that peace could only come from God himself. No earthly ruler could ever bring it about, even with the best of intentions. As the prophet Jeremiah warned, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt" (Jeremiah 17:9). Only a change in the human heart, resulting in reverence for God and obedience to his ways, could ever bring true peace to the family of mankind. Only when people learned to set aside their jealousies and anger and ambitions and greed — only when they learned that the Creator God, not themselves, was the source and center of all things — only then would peace come.

This truth was not lost on Isaiah the prophet. We hear him voicing it in the lesson chosen for today, from chapter 11 of his book. Whoever will be God's Messiah, the bringer of peace, he will be one who will communicate God's righteousness and wisdom, and show people what it means to live in the fear of God.

He will be the descendent of David, says Isaiah — he calls him a Branch “from the stump of Jesse,” David’s father — but he won’t lead by pulling rank on the people in a domineering fashion. Instead, he will lead by the Spirit of God:

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord— and he will delight in the fear of the Lord . . . Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist (Isaiah 11:2-3, 5).

Isaiah was so excited about this hope of the coming One that he carried his vision of peace into the animal kingdom:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest (Isaiah 11:6-8).

Did Isaiah really mean, Mom, that you could send your toddler out to play with rattlesnakes? Or take your family to the zoo and watch the lion eat hay in the same cage with the oxen? I wonder if this isn’t symbolic language the prophet is using to describe the wonderful world of peace the Messiah will bring on the *human* scene. Why do I say this? Because, as Paul asks in 1 Corinthians, “Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?” (1 Corinthians 9:9-10). The peace the Messiah will bring is peace for God’s human family, first of all.

That peace will begin, the prophet says, in one particular place. We find that in another passage, in Isaiah chapter 2:

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:3-4).

Some people think peace can come about if people would “just agree to get along.” But people are people, and not everybody wants to “get along.” That’s why the United Nations has been so ineffective — there’s no “getting along” with the likes of Kim Jung Il, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin or Adolf Hitler — men whose names have become household words for oppression, torture and genocide. There’s only one way the human spirit will ever know peace, and that’s to recognize that there’s a greater Authority than our wants, our ambitions, our desires.

The Bible tells us that submission to this higher Authority begins in one special place — the place where God’s law is honored and obeyed, the place from which his way of peace begins to spread throughout the world. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” Violence starts to melt away when people begin to know the Lord, and they will begin to know him in that one special spot: “They will neither harm nor destroy *on all my holy mountain*, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

I shouldn’t have to remind you that in the New Testament this special place isn’t a piece of urban real estate in Palestine. In the New Testament we learn that God’s holy mountain isn’t a hill with an ornate, expensive Temple sitting on it. The “holy mountain” is the place where we encounter Christ in his glory (2 Peter 1:18). The Jerusalem to which we belong is the “new Jerusalem” that comes down out of heaven for us (Revelation 21:2). We live today in that heavenly city, “Zion, city of our God,” which is the church of Jesus Christ. And God’s peace for this darkened world is to begin here, as his Word goes forth to all peoples until “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Is that why Jesus, in our Gospel lesson for today, took care to make sure that the church would be a place of peace — a place where even the weakest, littlest members of our community — the children — would find a welcoming and protective home? “See that you do not despise one of these little ones,” he told his disciples. “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” “Let the children come to me,” he said on another occasion. “Do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

And perhaps that's why Jesus, in our Gospel passage, lays down some specific procedures for resolving conflicts in the church. We aren't to hold grudges against one another, or let resentments build up, or let our anger smolder until there's some kind of flare-up that brings grief to the body. Instead, if we have a problem with what somebody else is doing or saying, we're to discuss it with them. And if we can't work it out, then there's a process by which we involve the other members of our congregation in helping to resolve the conflict. Then, if the troublemaker still can't be reconciled, he or she ought to leave the congregation and not have any more contacts with its members. This is for the sake of the peace of the church, because, as Paul says, "God has called us to peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). In all of this, we need to make sure that we aren't the troublemakers. The old Christmas song that was popular in the 1950s is still appropriate: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

Peace isn't a "thing" that can materialize all at once, out of nothing, just because people get tired of strife and violence. Peace — whether international peace or simply good and open relationships in the home, or with people we deal with daily — this peace is a process that takes place over time, as we learn to lay aside our self-centeredness and obey the Word of the Lord. And that Word has to go forth from God's "holy mountain," the "new Jerusalem" that is the body of Christ — a worshiping church, a teaching church, a sharing church, a caring church. Jesus gave us, his church, the assignment to spread that way of peace. He made us responsible for helping people live in a loving and obedient relationship with God. "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," he said, "and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

That's an awesome responsibility, but one we can't escape if we're true to our faith and calling. Many good people have been hurt by harsh words spoken and thoughtless acts done to them in the church. As a result they may have fallen away from fellowship with the body. How we deal with one another in the body of Christ is a critical part of whether they're bound to heaven or loosed for another destiny. I don't see how else we can take Jesus' words. God's peaceable Word must go forth from "his holy mountain," but before it can go forth it needs to take root in Zion, the church of Jesus Christ.

Peace comes to us when the Prince of Peace comes to us. Of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul said, "He is our peace." During this Advent season we prepare to receive him afresh into our troubled world, into our church, into our families, into our own hearts. But the Prince of Peace is here now. For he said to us, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19). *There is peace in our midst*, for Jesus is here — here in the proclamation of his word; here in our sharing of his gifts, the loaf and the cup; here in the loving touch of those who know him as Savior and Lord. He who is our peace is *in our midst*. Therefore, as we gather around his table we greet one another with those ancient words, so full of both solemnity and hope: "The peace of the Lord be with you."

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