

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling

Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church

December 8, 2013

Advent 2

Isaiah 11:1-10

For those of you who weren't here last week, I talked about how I am determined this year to find balance during this crazy season we call Christmas. I'm determined to do what I can to make the holiday less stressful and exhausting and yet still enjoy the trappings it offers. I said I want to enjoy the season, even some of the overly hyped commercialized parts of it, but I also want to find the *holy* in the *holiday*.

In order to do that, I said I'm going to follow the advice of the de-clutter experts, and I encouraged everyone else to follow their advice, too. You know how they encourage us to clean out our closets by deciding what to keep, give or throw away? Well, I've decided to do that with some of my holiday traditions and happenings so I can find balance and find the holy in the holiday. Despite what we may think, not everything on our to-do list does need to get done. You can throw away, or give away, some of the things on your to do list. Throw away the things that have no meaning and only stress you out; give away the things you don't have time for this year. (Because you're only giving them away, you can bring them back next year.) You can also keep what is most meaningful, so that you can walk in the light of the Lord and therefore help others walk in the light of the Lord, too. Because ultimately, isn't that Christmas is really about?

But, of course, no matter how much we decide to give away or throw away, there are still things left to be done. So I want you to take no more than 30 seconds and write down on one of the sidebars in your bulletin, what you still need to get done before Christmas Day.

Next, I want you to write down what you hope Christmas will be like for you. What kind of day do you hope to have? Thinking more broadly, what kind of relationships do you hope to be a part of? And thinking even more broadly, what kind of world do you want to live in this Christmas and beyond? *The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight.* What are your hopes, both personally and communally, for Christmas and beyond? Write those down.

Today, Isaiah paints for us a beautiful vision of what the world *shall look like*:

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.

I heard these words read last Sunday at a funeral, and when I heard them the first thing that crossed my mind was, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard." And I've heard these words many times. I knew I would be preaching on them today. But the first thing that came to my mind was, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard." In what world does a wolf lie down with a lamb? In what world does a lion eat straw with an ox, or a leopard lie down with a kid? In what world does a little child lead a lion?

That doesn't look like the world I live in. Does it look like the world you live in? The world I live in has intruder drills at school where the kids are told to hide behind their desks, as if a desk can really keep them safe. The world I live in heard the devastating news of Newtown about a year ago this time. The world I live in has a full-time police officer at my daughters' elementary school and he carries a gun and parents are OK with this because none of us want another Newtown.

That's the world I live in. What does your world look like?

Is it any wonder our first thoughts when hearing these words are, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard? What world are you living in, Isaiah?"

You might think that given his utopian vision Isaiah was living in a world that was perfect.

But you would be wrong.

These words from Isaiah were not spoken in a moment of reverie when the beauty of the mountain brooks and the serenity of the quiet pastures made the prophet aware of where it was all leading. He was not watching a dazzling sunset. He was watching the dazzling swords of the great and overpowering Assyrian army as they sliced their way through his native land of Palestine, leaving nothing but a trail of blood and agony. He was living through what has been called the first holocaust of the Jews. It occurred between 740 and 700 B.C.E. Five times during those 40 years the Assyrian army stampeded through Israel working terror and destruction wherever it went.

With no regard for anyone's culture, with no regard for anyone's religion, with no regard for anyone else's life, they came, devouring everything and everyone in their path. Over and over and over, the people of Isaiah's Judah had been ravaged. The horrid sounds of war were ever familiar. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with confidence that he or she would survive? It was a horrible forty years, those years in which Isaiah lived.

But the prophet spoke. "Even though the world has become a living nightmare," he was saying, "even though there is no sign anywhere that peace will ever come, even though human greed and destructiveness are running rampant across our world, hear this: THE PROMISE OF GOD IS MORE POWERFUL THAN THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF HUMANITY! Let me say that again: The promise of God is more powerful than the destructiveness of humanity! The wolf *shall* dwell with the lamb; the leopard *shall* lie down with the kid. A little child *shall* lead them.

These words may be the craziest I've ever heard. But you know what? I believe them. If I didn't I would laugh out loud at them in the middle of a funeral. But I didn't laugh. I listened to them with hope, because I believe them.

When the kids come home and tell me they had an intruder drill at school, it pains me . . .because the reality of our world hits home and because I believe the world doesn't have to be that way. When I think of Newtown, I choke up . . .because I can't bear the thought of losing a child and because I believe the world doesn't have to be that way. When I see the police car parked at Tillman, I get a clear visual of what the world is like . . .but I believe deep down it doesn't have to be that way.

Isaiah's declaration may stand in stark contrast to the terror and brutality that pervade our world, but I hear in his words a deep and persistent human hope for peace and justice, and the promise of a Messiah who will deliver it.

That's what I hear. And no matter how crazy the words sound, I believe them.

I believe them because every now and then I see a small shoot of life bursting forth from a dead stump. What seemed like the end of everything, what seemed lifeless, is transformed into something new and life giving. I've seen families pick-up the pieces after a loss and find joy again; I've seen people find love again; I've seen parents work through painful times with their children; I've seen people who thought they would never have a child have one; and I've seen people who thought cancer would kill them live another 10 years to tell about it.

I believe Isaiah's words because I've seen tiny tendrils burst forth from dead stumps; I've seen flowers bloom where I never thought they would; and branches grow from its roots.

I believe his words because I've seen life come from that which appears lifeless.

And that, my friends, is how hope gets its start-it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place. These tiny tendrils long to break through the hardness of our disbelief, the times where want to laugh out loud at such crazy words about lions and lambs lying down together; these seedlings are small yet tenacious; and they encourage us to believe even when it is impossible to do so.

Which is what Advent is all about. Advent has the courage to believe that with God, all things are possible. Advent encourages us to believe that no matter what happens, no matter what bleak, miserable stuff life and the world throws at us, that God is coming. And not only is God coming, but God is coming for you.

This is the beauty of the God Isaiah proclaims, and I believe him.

I believe him because this is the promise of Advent. That the God who set in the world in motion at the very beginning, is also the God who raised up a Savior for **us, who came to us, who lived among us, and who was born among us.**

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to write down your Christmas to-do list and then your Christmas hopes. Today, I encourage you to find a few minutes to review your list and work backwards, circling the tasks that contribute directly to your own hopes and longings for your life and the world. My guess is there are things on your list that are important in the short run but in the long run don't contribute to your larger vision and hopes.

So let me suggest that in order to find balance this Advent, you should have as many things on your to-do list that contribute to your hopes and longings, as you do stuff that simply needs to get done.

During this season of Advent, I invite each of us to not only walk in the light, but to be the light for other people, so that we can see Isaiah's words come to life.

Amen.

Sources:

www.workingpreacher.org

Day One, "Not Much But Enough For Me", 2010