

## **A Vision of Peace**

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – December 4, 2016  
First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI  
Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

Fifty years ago a confirmation class student by the name of Debby Eby stood in the doorway of my office at Saint Andrews UCC church in Lancaster, PA and sassily asked me a question I've pondered for five decades since. "Rev Sev," she smiled as she asked a question I really didn't think she wanted answered at that time, at 10 pm on a Friday evening after our teen hangout known as "The Place" had shut down for yet another challenging weekend, "why do you read the Bible?"

I looked at her, a gangly teenage girl, all of fourteen years of age, and of an outstanding family of the church, a bit bedraggled by all of the frantic gyrations she had endured for three hours in the church fellowship hall. "I read the Bible for a lot of reasons," I said to her. "Studying the Bible is my profession, you know." She smiled and turned to leave. "See you Sunday," she said as she walked away. Like a prophet of old, this young adult had asked a question out of the blue, so to speak, that has, from time to time since, come back to me with all of the force of generations that have wrestled with the mystery of God.

Here, at the other end of a lifetime of service to the Church, nearing the completion of another time of interim ministry on behalf of the UCC, the question is just as relevant, if not more so, as I ponder the

Lectionary texts for this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent. During over five decades of studying and serving, I have found the Bible to be, at times, almost overwhelmingly rich with descriptive language about God. In this week's text from Isaiah one of my favorite Hebrew words appears as a definition of God. Jesus used it to describe God's mysterious actions on behalf of God's people, Israel. *Ruach*. God is *Ruach*. God is Spirit! And, as such, the effects of God's presence may be seen and felt, but never fully comprehended nor controlled. The word can also be translated as *wind* or *breath*. God, like the wind, is unpredictable and beyond human control and management. According to Isaiah's vision of the Peace God promises to the nation and its people, God's spirit intrudes on our present reality and disrupts it – offering new and daring possibilities at just the precise time they are needed most. Walter Bruggemann has written, “the poet (meaning prophet) refers to God's life-giving, future creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind which can create an utter newness.” This *Ruach* (wind) blows over the stumps left behind, following a great conflagration like the fires in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee this past week, and creates new possibilities.

I've actually read the Bible for many reasons; for wisdom and counsel, for knowledge about its languages and how best to move the insights it offers from ancient times to modern times, for its poetry, its intriguing stories, its myths which contain truths known throughout

human history. The deeper I move into the mystery with which these texts seem determined to confront us, the more I am reminded that a significant purpose of them is to remind us all that we are not God and that we ought to give up the pretense that somehow we can think and act like God.

Hence, one of the by-products of a lifetime of reading the Bible, is wrapped around the meaning of the term “reverence.” Reverence begins with the awareness of our own limitations. We can’t always fix things that have gone awry. We need help. We need to change our perspective. We need a change of heart. We need an alternative vision, one that differs from that with which we are so familiar and comfortable. Texts like today’s remind us that in this world we are often confronted by something far larger than human capability. That something has been described as *Ruach* has inspired a vision of peace, the peace-filled realm of God that looks like an *impossible dream* from the perspective of the arrogant, those who rely solely on themselves and who refuse to entertain any other possibility except their own. To such, the prophet speaks of a vision of God’s realm that is so different it steals our breath away even as we chuckle along with Woody Allen who once quipped, “If the lion and ox are going to lie down together, neither of them are going to get much sleep.”

The vision of Isaiah came at a time fraught with sociopolitical tension. His vision is not merely the wishful thinking of one caught in the lion's jaws. Isaiah's vision sought to transform how Israel was to view their present reality. His vision was to function like an Edward Hick's painting. The vision of God's *peaceable kingdom* was intended to serve as a framework for Israel's future with Israel's historical realities painted in the background. Isaiah's vision is a powerful rhetorical worldview that presents a new social reality created by God. It was a call to live and act in the realm of a different administration, directed by an alternative agenda, under a new Ruler, One who rules in justice, righteousness, and peace.

*To live with our eyes flooded with the vision of this alternative realm is to see a world very similar to Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. In this realm violence is washed from all hands and weapons of warfare are turned into instruments of peace and productivity.*

*They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks  
Nation shall not take up sword against nation  
nor will they train for war any more*

You might ask, when will this heavenly vision ever touch ground? Advent eyes have seen the seeds of this vision planted in a manger stall among the peaceful animals, while angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." We see the vision in the face of a real human life---Jesus of Nazareth. He lived with the imposition of Roman dominance, overwhelming poverty, and revolutionary violence. He gathered a people to live into the vision and reality of God's reign. He proclaimed that the poor are God's blessed ones and peacemakers are God's children. He taught his followers not to offer eye for eye, violence for violence, but to offer love and compassion. We see his peaceable kingdom as he hangs on the cross, a lamb next to wolves, and forgives the lions who had done him violence. Isaiah's vision has kissed the earth in the coming of Jesus Christ.

***But, Isaiah's vision is yet to be fulfilled.*** It invites us to step into the picture. It calls us to take up our cross and follow the one who has walked into Isaiah's vision with all his body, heart, mind and soul. This vision seeks to tame our beastly natures. It invites us to be at peace with our enemies, and to taste a bit of paradise.

Isaiah's vision beckons us to enter a new world, to walk into God's painting of what that world might be. His vision calls us to live by an alternative reality to our violence ridden one. Isaiah's vision touched the

earth in the child born in Bethlehem, who grew up in Nazareth, and who dared to dream as a young adult to think of how different his world might become were he to gather a community of believers who had courage to see the world differently than it was. Where is that courage today? Where is that community today? Where is that vision of peace today? These are the questions these Advent texts raise with us who claim to be among his followers today. In the vision of the prophet is more than a hint of hope for our weary world. Here is a promise of peace in God's reign, where

*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 shall lead them.*

Oh, let it be dear Lord.... Let it be!

Amen.

