

Victoria Linner

Second Sunday of Advent, **Isaiah 11:1-10**, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13. **Matthew 3:1-12**

“The lion shall eat straw like the ox.” Amen.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, a day centered on **peace**. If you’ve been to a lot of Episcopal church services (and I know many of you have been to *a lot* of Episcopal church services) you may have noticed that peace comes up a lot in our tradition. We take a moment in the middle of the service to say, “**Peace** be with you.” After the Eucharistic prayer, we often say or sing some version of the Lamb of God chant which ends with “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us **peace**.” And throughout much of the year, we are sent out with the words, “Go in **peace** to love and serve the Lord.”

Clearly peace is important.

So, what do our Scripture readings today have to tell us about peace?

In the Isaiah passage, the prophet describes a future ruler who will bring about a just reorienting of society that leads to peace. The prophet helps us visualize what righteous judgement and equity can do for us by crafting an extended metaphor using animals.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”

Here, we see apex predators and their typical prey living and resting together.

“The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”

Can you picture that?

The mighty lion, a lethal carnivore armed with sharp claws, the king of the jungle, the symbol of ferocity, power, and strength... casually chomping on some straw.

It almost feels wrong, right? This image goes against our cultural and rhetorical expectations. It doesn't fit into our understanding of the animal kingdom and the natural order of things.

This vision of peace is so far from how things are now that to me, it seems like it can only be realized through radical transformation. What would it take for wolves, leopards, and lions to stop hunting, to cease to be predators?

I think it would take an incredible transformation. A life changing transformation. A God led transformation. But, let's place a pin in this idea for now and we'll come back to it in a little while.

This poem in Isaiah is bookended by the image of the shoot and root of Jesse. This future ruler who will bring true peace will come from the line of Jesse. Now, who is Jesse? Jesse is King David's father, so this righteous and faithful leader will come from the line of David.

Now I wonder who that could be...

Friends, Advent is the season of preparation and waiting for the coming of Jesus. It is our tradition to interpret this and other passages in Isaiah as pointing us towards Jesus. Similarly, John the Baptist is pointing us towards Jesus in our reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

In this passage, we meet John the Baptist who is announcing the coming of Jesus. He explains what Jesus will do using intense imagery of unfruitful trees and chaff being thrown into fire.

John's call to action is to repent, to bear fruit worthy of repentance. And while his language is a bit startling, he has good reason to sound the alarm about the consequences of living unrepentantly. I don't see this passage as a threatening message to confess your sins, or else God is going to throw you into a fire. Instead, I understand this to mean that evil and sin are incompatible with the kingdom of heaven. God's love is a purifying fire that burns away everything that separates us from him. The question is less about whether a person is going to enter the kingdom of heaven, but rather when and how a person will prepare for the experience of encountering God fully.

John knew that his audience was about to meet Jesus and that the kingdom of heaven has come near. God incarnate was walking amongst humans here on Earth. John is giving guidance for how to prepare for this most special encounter. And his advice, his demand really, is that everyone repent.

A simple definition of repentance is that repentance means turning away from evil and forging a new relationship with God. And I argue that repentance is the radical transformation I was talking about earlier. See, I told you we were going to come back to that and now here we are.

For us to have the peace that is described in Isaiah, we have to do the hard work that John the Baptist describes in Matthew. We have to repent.

Both of these passages are about encountering God. In Isaiah, the complete transformation that leads to peace will come about because “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” This is another fascinating image. “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Isn’t the sea made of water? Maybe this image is telling us that true peace comes from intimacy with and full understanding of God.

And maybe the way we come near to this knowledge of the Lord is through repentance. But what does repentance look like nowadays? Now, I hate to say this, especially since it’s the holiday season, but there is a lot that we as individuals, and especially we as systems and societies need to repent from. I don’t feel the need to attempt to lay out every way that we collectively have turned our backs on God. And I implore you to be honest with yourself about what’s going on in your life that’s holding you back from living into God’s love and restorative vision. I also want to make it clear that while everyone needs to repent, everyone doesn’t need to repent in the same way or for the same sins. For example, while John the Baptist’s message of repentance is for all the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, he has specific confrontational words for the religious leaders of his time, the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And in Isaiah, it is the predators whose existence is being upended for God’s vision of peace more so than the prey.

I do believe that it’s in our control to discern what we need to let go of, in other words, what should be burned away, so that we can open our hearts and respond to the knowledge of God that we already have and the presence of God that is already here.

Friends, the presence of God is already here. Yes, the season of Advent is about preparation for Christ’s arrival, but I will remind everyone that this is not the first Advent. Jesus

Christ has already come. Jesus Christ has already shown us what love looks like on this earth. And Jesus Christ has already demonstrated God's love for us in his death and resurrection.

We say, "Peace be with you," because we believe that God has already given us peace. Yes, it's not the exact same peace that will come in the resurrection when God has set everything everywhere to rights. But it's still the peace that surpasses all understanding. It's still the peace that comes from knowing that our Redeemer lives. And it is the peace that we get to participate in every day that we repent and choose to follow Christ.