

November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Preparing for Peace

War is everywhere around us. We are weary of hearing it in the news every day. The war in Ukraine, still going after nine months and the people now face winter without electricity. The war in Afghanistan and Yemen, where people are starving now for lack of food. The conflict in Iran, led by women asserting their rights to their bodies and their futures. The war in Turkey against the Kurds who are denied their independence. The war in the United States waged by gunmen in grocery stores and schools and shopping centers and nightclubs. I am heart-sick of the violence and war. We are all sick and tired of it.

These days feel dark. And that's where Advent begins, is begins in the dark. It begins in a world of hurt and pain. In a world full of grief and deep sorrow. It begins here, in the dark. Where we acknowledge how heartbroken we are. And how we despair of things changing. And how we feel helpless in this world that is always at war with itself. We need a power beyond us to come and help us stop the destruction. We need someone to help save us.

The world is dark. Life is threatened by death. Peace has been swallowed up by war. And we are afraid. A toxic cloud of suspicion and anxiety has begun to distort everything. We take sides. We turn others into monsters. We label each other good or bad, liberal, communist, fascist, Nazi. War begins with the words we speak. And the names we lob like grenades. If we think war is something far away, we are wrong. It's going on now against teachers and police officers and librarians and elected officials. People are attacking Jews and Asians and black and brown people and the LGBTQ community and anyone and everyone. People bring guns to Kroger, to Walmart. They are prepared to fight. They do not see peace, only war. Every place has become a possible battlefield.

I sense that things will get worse. People will become more anxious and afraid because things are changing. Things are becoming more unsettled at a speed we can't keep up with. The climate is changing. Resources are faltering. Governments are failing. It will get worse. More people will suffer. More will flee famine and violence. More will become refugees.

Men, women and children crossing every border, however they can, to find a safe place to live in peace.

We all want peace. Every human being wants to be safe from violence and war. And our world is so full of war right now. During the holiday season we might want to close our eyes to it. We might want to ignore everything that is going on in favor of comfort and joy and a baby sleeping in heavenly peace in a manger. But that's not what Advent is about. Advent is a time of watching and waiting. It is a time we prepare for the one who is coming, and we confess that we need him. Because there is no peace, around us or with in us. We are trapped in a cycle of violence. We have lost our compassion. We have forgotten how to be human. This is not how things are supposed to be. We need God. We need God with us.

The peace of God is what we need. And God's peace means justice for all people. It means righteousness. It is what the prophet Isaiah is talking about today. Life abundant for everyone, creative and free and full.

Peace does not mean life that is asleep or numb or detached. Peace is not life crushed or closeted or oppressed. That is not what God wants. That

is not what God wills for us. God wills that our community, every community be a city on a hill. That every town be a little Jerusalem where God's spirit resides. And every person a temple. And there will be peace because there will be justice. God's judgment will rule over everything. And everyone will have what is right and fair. No one will have to fight for it. No one will have to defend themselves with fists or guns or bombs. No one will go to war against an enemy. There will be no need to fight. No need for self-defense. No need for swords or spears. All weapons will sit useless in the corner. They will be repurposed as gardening tools and farm equipment.

There will be justice for everyone. Because God will be the judge. We won't need to judge one another. We won't need to condemn and attack and destroy. We won't need to take control like a villain in a Marvel movie. God's rule will be enough. We won't need to prepare for war to prepare for peace. We will realize that always being prepared to fight does not prepare us for mercy and compassion and grace. Promoting violent words and violent action does not prepare us for the one who is to come.

During Advent, we prepare for Jesus. We say that he is coming and that we need him to come. And that, even though the world is dark, we need to stay awake because God is awake. Because God is coming the bring a new kingdom, a new reality; one that is not based on war, but on peace.

The Christ will not come as a mighty warrior with an army charging forward with weapons drawn. God will come quietly and unexpectedly.

He will arrive small and defenseless as a baby. He will be laid in a manger, an animal feeding trough, because there is no room for him anywhere else. His coming is not meant to inspire us to fight, but to love. To act with gentleness. To reach out with compassion and hold him tenderly and rock him to sleep. The world outside is rough and angry and cold. But here with him, we behold a miracle. We see the precious gift that life is. We realize there can be peace, wherever we are, with the Christ child in our arms. This baby just by being born, will inspire us to put away our swords. And start over with him.

We are prepared by the world for aggression. We are prepared to fight, to draw our weapons, to kill or be killed. We tell ourselves it is for the sake of hope, for the sake of love. But what if love doesn't mean war?

What if we believe God is the judge and not us, and God will make things right? What if we learn from Jesus how to heal our divisions and resolve our conflicts and to forgive and love one another, and we lived our lives prepared for peace?

The prophet Isaiah promises a time future of peace. He promises a future where there is no war and we are no longer threatened by enemies, and God will rule over all. Isaiah announced this promise to Israel long ago. And he announces it to us too. This vision of a future of justice and righteousness. Of a time when we won't need to fight. And our weapons will be turned into tools. And our battlefields will become gardens. And what if that future isn't that far away? What if we are the vision of what is to come?

So what needs to change in us? What swords of ours need to become plowshares? What spears need to become pruning hooks? How can change our habits and take the energy we spend on criticism and judgment and condemnation of others and put it into listening and understanding and tilling and plowing and watering and weeding and

growing good things and producing the fruit of the Spirit? What if, instead of constantly preparing for war, we prepared for peace?

It begins with us. It begins in our own hearts and our spirits. It begins with us taking an honest look at ourselves and our attempts to avoid our own darkness and pain. The apostle Paul calls us to be accountable and to live honorably. To wake up and look at our own lives and repent of our complaining and selfishness and jealousy and quarreling. To work on ourselves before we try to work on others. Live in the light, not in the dark. Don't hide in the shadows. Prepare yourself for life in God's righteousness and mercy by living that life now.

Lay aside the works of darkness, Paul says. Don't go to sleep. Don't close your eyes to the world. Open your eyes and wake up. Be aware of what's going on. Be engaged. And be prepared for God's kingdom that will come. Paul uses the plural form of you here. That would be you guys if you're from Ohio. All y'all if you're from Kentucky. Remember what time it is, y'all. Lay aside the works of war and destruction, everyone. Practice the works of God's kingdom, the work of peace and joy and gentleness. The work of love that labors for justice and insists on

grace and reminds us of what life should be and does not settle for life as it is. Y'all need to be prepared. To live as if Christ and his kingdom are coming. As if the poor are blessed and the lost can be found and those outside can come in. That the goodness of God is always good and it isn't far away and it doesn't go to sleep. That God is near us and beside us, pursuing with us what is right and true and honorable. And there can be peace.

And we hold this peace within us. We hold it like an infant, like a newborn child. We hold the precious life around us. We treat it with tenderness and delight. Without believing we are the final judge of what is just and right. We leave that judgment to God. And we put all of our hope, all of our energy into pursuing goodness and praying for the earth's redemption. We light a candle in the dark. We stay awake to watch and wait. We prepare, not for war; not for battle and destruction and death. But for a new life and a new world without fear and devastation and loss. We prepare for peace, the peace which Christ will bring.