

“The Advent of Peace,”
based on Isaiah 64:1-12, David Jahnke 11/27/11

In today’s passage, Isaiah pleads with God to “tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake and the nations might tremble at your presence.” The nations here are the goyim; the Gentiles who, at the time, did not know the God of Israel and whom Isaiah therefore calls God’s adversaries. This is not surprising since it was the goyim armies who had invaded Israel, leaving it a barren wasteland and destroying the temple.

Isaiah wants God to come down so that the nations realize what they have done and repent. But note that here, at least, Isaiah only wants God to reveal himself to them, not destroy them.

Isaiah’s lament is the cry of Advent. It is the cry for the heavens to be opened, not that non-believers would be destroyed, but that the wicked would finally fall down before God and turn from evil. This is a cry for peace, this week’s theme; peace among nations, peace within our communities, families and ourselves. Today’s sermon is about peace happening through 1. a Christ-centered understanding of God, 2. through a critical and yet hopeful look at history, 3. through waiting and watching in the present with eyes to see and ears to hear...

We begin with the heavens opening and the world shaking from Jesus’ first coming. The heavens shook with angelic choruses at Jesus’ birth and an earthquake shook Jerusalem at his death and resurrection. And in the middle of his ministry, the heavens opened and a voice thundered while he, Peter, James and John were up on a mountain. And the *historical* result of Jesus’ incarnation was the welcoming of the gentile nations into the worship of the God of Israel.

For these reasons and many more, we believe Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s hope. And their *universal* hope is critical for us to maintain as well. Because our actions toward other peoples depend on our beliefs about God’s feelings toward them. The somewhat ambivalent presentation of God’s feelings toward the nations in the Old Testament is clarified by the revelation of Christ to the world and the proclamation of the gospel of God’s love to all nations.

God remains in an adversarial relationship to sin but all sinners— Gentile and Jew- are now welcomed into covenant relationship with God.

But just as the Israelites strayed from God time and again throughout their history, so has the impulse toward condemnation and violence remained a threat throughout Christian history as well. So just as Isaiah looked critically at Israel's sins, I must briefly look at the church's.

I watched a Ken Burns' documentary this week called "The West." Many well-intentioned missionaries came to save the souls of native Americans in the 16th century; but the conquistadors also came over with greed-- looking for gold-- and the missionaries wrongly believed in forced conversion, thinking this was for the good of the Indians who would otherwise go to Hell.

But one Spanish conquistador was different. Juan Cabeza de Vaca— translated "John head of cow," interestingly— an Indian-like name. Juan had been enslaved by a Native tribe in Mexico. After escaping, he made his way through storms on a boat to present-day Galveston, Texas where he started to make his way back to Mexico City by land. After being treated so terribly as a slave, he was astonished at the generosity and kindness of the tribes he encountered on his way. And as he treated them in kind, sharing the love of Christ and praying for their healing, he came to be known as a great healer.

Soon hundreds of Native Americans were following him around from community to community. He became a peace-maker, believing that true conversion could only come through kindness and love.

This story ends sadly. He and his Indian followers met up with a column of Spanish soldiers who had left Hell in their wake— pillaging communities, burning farms, and enslaving the natives. De Vaca's Indian followers wondered to him, "How can you and these soldiers be from the same tribe? You heal the sick. They kill the healthy. You want nothing. They take everything."

A historian, Richard White, commented:

“De Vaca’s journey through this extraordinary world ends up in a very ordinary world; a world of Spanish slavers and Indian victims. But in between, in that moment, there was a vision of how something else might have happened. It never would fully happen...but would appear in glimpses again and again as Indians and whites interacted in the continent.”

This exemplifies where we are as Christians in Advent. We are journeying in an extraordinary world. One where all tribes and nations are united in peace and prosperity and joy; where faith, grace and other resources are shared so that individuals are not weighed down with food or safety insecurities or our own sin and doubt. And we see glimpses of this in the great Kingdom work going on here in and through the church and beyond.

But again and again, we find ourselves in a very ordinary world. One where sins- systematic and personal-- lead to hunger, untreated disease and war among and within nations, homes and ourselves. So Advent teaches us to remember not just critically but with hope— just as Isaiah also remembered the mighty acts of God in history. We cling to the glimpses, understanding that they are the real deal rather than the aberration because we know that the Kingdom came in Jesus Christ and is here through his Spirit.

And here is some very good news that a Willow Grove Pres. layperson sent me a couple weeks ago; news which testifies to Kingdom glimpses being the deeper reality of God working out his plan in history.

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker has shown statistically that our world is much less violent than it ever was. Peace is expanding within and among nations as history progresses. I may copy the article for you to see the statistics. Of course any sort of a nuclear attack will blow these statistics out of the water. So we must do all that we can to prevent such a horror. But Pinker writes about the historical trend toward peace:

The fact that violence is so pervasive in history, but nonetheless can [and has] be[en] brought down tells us that human nature includes both inclinations toward violence and inclinations toward peace – what [Abraham] Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" – and...historical changes have increasingly favoured our better angels. These changes include the development of government, commerce, literacy, and the mixing of ideas and peoples, all of which encourage people to inhibit their impulses, expand

their empathy, extricate themselves from their parochial vantage points, and treat violence as a problem to be solved rather than as a contest to be won.

Jesus seems to have gotten to the root of all of these; the love of all, even our adversaries, and the education of the weak and the poor. And it is his Spirit that is bringing these peaceful developments about in the world, even though so many do not rightfully acknowledge Him.

Isaiah points to such a hopeful perspective when he says,

“Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember your ways.”

So in the midst of much harder times than we Americans who ever never experienced war can even imagine, rather than despairing, Isaiah first recollects the days of “better angels”— when God was more obviously at work. And then Isaiah makes the amazing claim that the angels of God are at work everywhere to the perceiving ear and eye and to the righteous spirit.

Now we have to slow down and wait and watch in order to sense the angels at work and find peace. A church member posted the following about their 4-year old daughter guiding a family walk they took:

“[My daughter] took it upon herself to be our guide, stopping us every few minutes to see something - - a police horse getting some trail exercise, hoof prints and poop [*of course...*]; crouching excitedly to spot a pair of mallards, to feel the grain of fallen logs, find rocks worthy to climb...” [David Seith]

He concluded the posting with this William Blake poem:

"To see a World in a grain of sand
And Heaven in a wild flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour..."

There is no peace without steadfast attention to the tremendous beauty always before and within us. Attention is how we allow God to shape us in peace. The whole world is in his hands. And so are we. His mercy covers all our sins. And his truth leads us out in all righteousness to share Christ's peace with the world. To the God of all grace who calls us to *eternal* union with Christ, be all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.