

Isaiah 11:1-2, 6-10
Matthew 3: 1-12

word count: 2,068

Occupying the northwest corner of 72nd Street and Central Park West stands one of the grandest old apartment buildings in New York. The Dakota is a Grimm's Fairytale architectural concoction in a mixture of German Gothic, French Renaissance and English Victorian. People remember it as the terrifying setting of *Rosemary's Baby*, and when you walk by it, you have to stop on the sidewalk and look up at its unsettling beauty and wrought iron railings.

On the night of December 8, 1980, thirty years ago this week, a friend and I were listening to music on the radio in her apartment on the upper-west side, when it was interrupted by a news bulletin. John Lennon had been shot outside the entrance to the Dakota, where he lived with Yoko and their young son, Sean, and had died from his wounds.

To this day, I still don't know exactly why I did it, but I excused myself from my friend's apartment, and rode my bicycle down Broadway to 86th St., headed east past my apartment, and then south down Central Park West to where crowds were gathered. It was a sea of people. Being a bicyclist, I was able to ride right up to the corner of the building, and hug the curb so other traffic could pass, until the crowds simply took over the entire intersection and spilled into the park.

It was below freezing and much past midnight, but people came out in whatever they had been wearing that day. They carried candles of all shapes and sizes and warmed their hands in the light. I don't know where the other candles came from; the uniform kind you see passed out at rallies, or whom it was that thought to bring them, but somehow the word had gotten out and people hurried out carrying candles, sharing without thinking.

This was not idol worship. John Lennon was our neighbor; one of many well-known people who chose to live amongst us in this beautiful, if still-funky (at that time) section of New York. Somehow, a pact existed whereby he could walk the streets with Sean on his shoulders, and only a tourist would ask him for an autograph. I only managed to see him a few times, but like most people, I would never have thought to approach him. And now, no one would be able to do so.

It felt unreal—everyone knows that violence occurs in New York from time to time, but this particular violence against an icon of our day was unfathomable, and people came out to share in their bewilderment. Tears streamed down faces and people held each other and racked with sobs or mourned in stillness.

At some point (it has been thirty years!) someone started singing: "All we are saying...is give peace a chance." Others joined in, chanting softly like a midnight choir, and then growing stronger: "*ALL we are saying...is give peace a chance. All we are saying...is give peace a chance.*" On and on it went, until I was too numbed by the cold, and turned my bike around and rode home. But the singing, which included other Lennon songs as well, went on for days until, it was reported, Yoko sent word to the crowds that they were keeping her family and her neighbors awake, and that the city was invited to join in Central Park that Sunday to observe ten minutes of silence. And so, we did. More than a hundred thousand New Yorkers gathered in the park; some climbed trees, others sat on the bases of statues, still others stood looking down at the ground, and for ten full minutes, over a hundred thousand typically loud, opinionated and largely secular New Yorkers prayed for peace in silence. The only sounds were open weeping, deep grief being expressed and the buzz of distant traffic that indicated that life was still going on, neither heeding nor hearing the knell or message of a prophetic voice now stilled. "*All we are saying...is give peace a chance.*"

Another murdered prophet stands with us again today, one whom our text from Matthew tells us that Isaiah spoke of when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Isaiah also lifts up the one who is to come from the stump of Jesse, (meaning, of the direct family line of David) who will have “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, and the knowledge” that the people might follow him in the ways of peace. This is the famous passage where we hear that “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.” It is a scene made famous in countless paintings of the “Peaceable Kingdom,” where none may hurt or destroy on all of God’s holy mountain.

What vision of peace can we speak of today, from a tradition that calls us to honor, even light candles for peace, when we as a nation remain yet another year at war, and new conflicts erupt around the globe? Are we like that buzz of distant traffic ignoring the prophets, be they Isaiah or John the Baptist, calling us to repent of our ways that keep us one more year from having the one thing the world needs most; peace on earth?

On the second Sunday in Advent, the vision of peace is our theme—it is the hope for peace and the radical confidence in God’s ability to bring this kind of transformation. But, how do we justify and hope for Peace given what we see in the world today?

We talk about beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks; how nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war any more. Today we read about the peaceable kingdom and speak about a Prince of Peace. How can we do so without a sense of hypocrisy?

A group of academics and historians has compiled this startling information: Since 3600 B.C., the world has known only 292 years of peace! During this period there have been 14,351 wars large and small, in which 4 billion people have been killed. Since 650 B.C., there have also been 1,656 arms races, only 16 of which have not ended in war. The remainder ended in the economic collapse of the countries involved.¹

Our soldiers are at the far corners of the earth, making great personal sacrifices, and yet we have a diminishing understanding of what these sacrifices are about. Young men, who should be seeing visions and dreaming dreams, are blowing themselves up instead because of a twisted fantasy about how they are doing their one true God’s will. People are being exiled, locked up, tortured, or killed; in the name of wars they had nothing to do with. Millions of people who have been displaced are living in camps, on the run, in places where they will never be welcomed home — literally millions of people without any country.

Drug cartels in Mexico have replaced the rule of law and use children with blank expressions who do not believe they have any future as their mules. Violence is the way in the name of profits from narcotics that rob our own people of a future as well.

A recession has instilled fear and a need to blame others for our misfortunes. Children are bullied in schools for being who they are, and anti-immigrant backlashes match the hatred of Islam that has swept the west.

Blown-off, strip-mined mountaintops and scarred, carved earth; smoke-belched skies and rivers that run orange with industrial poison; oh, the violence we inflict on our world. Never mind the Iraqis and the Afghans; we are waging a war on ourselves — a war on our poor, a war on our environment, a war on our young men, a war on our minorities, a war on our women and children.

It is not, I think, that human beings have become morally worse, or that we are any more inclined to violence and dehumanization than ever before. In fact, we may even have evolved from days more brutal than our own. But any improvements we have made in our ethics and civility are

far overshadowed by our improvements in the technologies of violence. We may, in fact, be a bit less inclined to kill, abuse, imprison, or obliterate each other and our world; but when we decide we want to, we are all too awesomely efficient.

We kill the prophets who point out where we have gone wrong and what we must do instead—in our times, their names were Gandhi, King, and owing to the anniversary of this week, we might add a gentle singer-songwriter named John, who proclaimed, “Give peace a chance.”

His namesake, John the Baptist in the desert was in the great tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He was aware that time was running out. In his burning message he had no time for peripheral matters. He was not prepared to splash about in the shallows. Soon the sword of Herod's guard would flash and his tongue would lie silent. Superficial people came out from Jerusalem to see him. They were intrigued by this strange phenomenon of a wild man preaching repentance. They were fascinated by frivolous things such as his dress, his diet, and his fierce declamatory oratory. They wanted to interview him and then tell all their friends about their remarkable experience. “Are you Elijah?” “No!” “Then who are you?” they persisted. They had their doubts about who he was but his message to their ears was clear: Repent. Stop, turn around, and look at what you are doing.

John asks us to hope for peace; the radical confidence that we can be the hands of God's peace that can transform the present strife into a peaceable kingdom. Someone is going to be born, a shoot from the ancestral tree of Jesse, who will have the wisdom and understanding of the ways of Creation. And that one will not judge by surface appearances — by who looks successful, or who seems powerful. That one will lead and ask us to follow with righteousness; in favor of the poor, in favor of the exploited, the meek, the victims, and the people who are only treated like things, like chess pieces in the great game of global warfare. And how we hope for peace is in how we follow that message that asks us to be servant leaders in the building of peace, love and understanding.

Every great once in a while, prophets are raised up. We may not recognize them when they walk amongst us, but they represent the presence of the authentic; they possess a voice that speaks truth to power, and they lead us where we must go. Their authenticity causes us to light candles in remembrance, as we light them here today for different reasons in the season of watching and waiting.

John the Baptist calls the people to “repent,” which means, “Stop. Turn around, and look at what you are doing.” He tells us that another one is coming whose sandals he is not fit to carry. This is one in whose way is the walk of peace, the way in which we today profess to be followers.

There is a vision of peace for us. It is not the current hallucination that being endlessly at war will insure a lasting peace or even prosperity; in fact, as we are learning, it is quite the opposite.

My former pastor once said, “Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can't just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, demand it from our governments as if peace were God's most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is.”

The peaceable kingdom of which Isaiah speaks is one that is left to us to discover and build. It remains to be seen how and when that will happen, but that it *must* happen is necessary for the survival of everything we have been given to steward. All I am saying...is give peace a chance.

This is an open table...

Sermon Resources

1. *Today in the Word*, June 19, 1992.
2. William Sloane Coffin

Scripture for Sunday, December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1-2, 6-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of God shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

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 God as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

1In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” 4Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”