

Dr. Paul Tellström
“Peace” Second Sunday in Advent, Year “A”

Irvine United Congregational Church
December 9, 2007

Hebrew Testament Reading *Isaiah 11:1-10*
New Testament Reading *Matthew 3:1-12*

word count: 2,024

Looking at our world today, the chances for the mutual peace Isaiah talks about seems slim. The prophet wrote at the time of the fall of the ten tribes of Israel, and during the time when Judah would also fall and be taken into captivity. Isaiah still foretold a time when there would be such peace that a child would lead all natural enemies such as the wolf and the lamb. Isaiah would have to look far into the future to see that day, as we are still looking ourselves.

A former president of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, and historians from England, Egypt, Germany, and India came up with some startling information: In almost 3,600 years of recorded history, the world has known only 292 years of peace. During this period, there have been roughly 15,000 wars, large and small, in which hundreds of millions of people have been killed.

There have been in excess of 8,000 peace treaties that were made and broken. Since 650 BC there have also been over 1,600 arms races, only 16 of which have not ended in war. The remainder ended in the economic collapse of the countries involved.

In all recorded world history, humankind has been at peace less than eight percent of the time.

As representatives of a species that cannot keep peace alive, it is no wonder that a prophet could only dream in words most poetic of a coming day when a child would lead us. It is no wonder that John the Baptist would rise up and cut through all niceties, all conventions, and across religious boundaries, in order to shout across the wilderness and down Jordan’s shore. It is no wonder that the voice we hear heralding the season of peace on earth, goodwill to all, is an angry voice.

For John is an angry man, and the message he shouts tells us to stop what we are doing, to turn around, to examine ourselves and our motives; to realize that there has to be a better way and that we don’t have it, so we have to change.

The violence and unrest that are in the world today fits in with 92% of human history, an absence of peace in the world once more in the season in which we celebrate it, doing so as only Isaiah could—dreaming of a future that holds peace for our children; led by a child into its fullness.

So, again this year the absence of peace has been made so much more real to us. And John the Baptist cries out for us to stop, turn around, look at what we are doing, and to change. John baptizes those in the Jordan who recognize what it is that they continue to do so that Peace cannot come into the world, and tells them to repent, which they do, and the water washes them clean.

When the authorities, religious or otherwise come forward, he has the same message for them, but his anger is more strident. Addressing the guests who come to see you as “a brood of vipers” might be frowned upon by Miss Manners or Letitia Baldrige. Etiquette is not John’s strong suit. He is passionate, impatient, and to the point. “Don’t call on your religious heritage to save you,” he is saying, “God can raise up true followers from these stones—if you can’t show yourself to bear the good fruit of your faith, then the axe will be laid to your roots. Give it up, or get out of the way.”

He is saying that all people have to stop, turn around, and examine what they are doing, and change. And to authorities, he is saying the same thing. “Do your actions represent what you are called by God to do and to be? What is the fruit of these actions that I see?”

He is familiar with the prophets. He has been likened to Elijah, and he says that he has come to prepare God’s way, and we should do likewise. Like Isaiah, he might be asking if we are working for a place where the wolf and the lamb would be able to lie down together. If not, then repent, turn around, and examine what you are doing here.

John might be questioning our own authorities, asking them the same thing. But in all of his fire, his impatience for us all to just get on with the business of making straight the path of God towards a peaceful world, he tells us that one is coming after him whose sandals he is not fit to tie. And that person is the child about whom we write cards this season that say “Peace on Earth,” the child for whom the candles of Hope and Peace are lit, and for whom Joy and Love will follow.

The peace that Jesus brings us is not the absence of trouble, for according to statistics, we have been experts in making sure that trouble is always with us. But rather, the peace that Jesus brings us is a new way of looking at God, and having the confidence to know that God is with us.

So John asks us to repent today. The word, which sounds so old-fashioned and fanatical, simply means to stop where we are, to turn around and examine where we have just been, and to change.

John speaks to all those who would gather at the Jordan River, just as you have metaphorically done by coming here today, and John speaks even more strongly to those who, by authority, would lead us.

We may not have John’s fiery temperament, his amazing passion, his desire to get nasty to get his point across, or his ability to be so willing to alienate people.

But at this time when John’s words come up in a season that proclaims peace, and on a Sunday when we light a candle for peace, what words could be said about how we go about pursuing peace?

John speaks to two groups of people—those who come down to learn to prepare the way of God and to be baptized, and those who speak in the voice of authority.

First, to those in authority whose original business was not only bringing those responsible for crimes against humanity to justice and protecting us from terrorism, but who are also must recognize that peace must ultimately be sought. He speaks to those who must hear that our country must maintain the same civil rights we have come to expect, and that human rights must be honored the world over, which includes the expectation that we honor the Geneva Convention and that torture in any form should not be up for discussion in any civilized nation. I was reminded of this in the last couple of days as an investigation into the disappearance of CIA videos of interrogations came to light.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of being asked to chair a committee to create a position paper on civil liberties and human rights in the wake of 9-11. The paper was written for The Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace, headed by Rev. George Regas. This was an education for me, as my committee included the past president of the ACLU, Steve Rohde, and the head of Human Rights Watch, Jane Olson. These are some of their words that made it into the final paper:

“We (The Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace) believe that the protection of civil liberties and human rights throughout the world are fundamental values that must not suffer from the great tragedy of September 11. We cannot let grief, anger and fear undo

us. Rather, we should harness those emotions to do everything to keep freedom alive. We must repudiate the fears that threaten to erode civil liberties.”

“As citizens of the world, we must acknowledge our role in both of these struggles. It has been said that one of the alarming lessons of history is that ‘liberty and truth are first casualties of war.’ Past experience teaches us that in times of war and national crisis, public fears and the authoritarian instincts of governments fuel each other, leading to repressive measures against those who oppose authority. We already see signs of intolerance and efforts to suppress dissent.”

Who among us is not torn by the desire for our safety and the safety of our children when weighed against our fundamental rights as citizens?

Benjamin Franklin’s words on these feelings have guided me through my own confusion in this area. A great war was fought during and around the formation of our government and the creation of the civil liberties that are ours to enjoy. During times when our country would either rise or fall, Franklin said, “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither.”

The peace that Jesus gives us this season is not the absence of trouble. But rather, it is a new and different way of looking at God.

And from authorities, troubled as good people are with the thorny issues that surround the search for stability and peace for this nation and the nations of the world, to those of us simply seeking peace for ourselves in this Advent season (as that is where all peace starts, within the human heart). We all need to examine what it means to have peace of mind this year, and to heed John’s call to repent; to stop, turn around, and examine what we are doing.

Stepping away from the troubles of the world for a moment, how do we need to examine our own healthiness as individuals in order to be able to serve and be good followers of a gospel of peace? I share this with you.

Duke University did a study on “peace of mind.” Factors found to contribute greatly to emotional and mental stability are:

- 1) The absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge was a major factor in unhappiness.
- 2) Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.
- 3) Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change. Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it.
- 4) Forcing yourself to stay involved with the living world. Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress.
- 5) Refusing to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.
- 6) Cultivating the old-fashioned virtues—love, humor, compassion and loyalty.
- 7) Not expecting too much of yourself. When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable.
- 8) Finding something bigger than yourself to believe in. Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness.

Believing in something bigger than ourselves is what draws us together in worship. Today the Advent candles are lit for peace, coinciding with our remembrance of Pearl Harbor Day, and the generation that lived through that war. Just as the candle of Hope was lit last week

coinciding with World AIDS Day and the hope that one day there will be a cure for this disease and others as well. What the light from these candles and those yet to be lit represent, is the light from above, from our spiritual centers, and from the God of Peace and Love that we struggle to understand, but come together to acknowledge in prayer, in song, and in service. Peace be with you.

But the peace that Jesus leaves us is not the absence of trouble, for according to statistics, we have been expert at making sure that trouble is always with us. But rather, the Peace that comes in the birth of a child brings us a new way of looking at God, and gives us the confidence to know that God is with us. God with us, Emmanuel. And peace on earth, goodwill to all. AMEN.

Sermon Resources

Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace, Position Paper on Civil Liberties. Cynthia Anderson Barker (attorney), Barbara James (Mobilization for the Human Family), Jane Olson (President, Human Rights Watch), Cheryll Dudley Roberts (ACLU, Mt. Hollywood Chapter), Steve Rohde (President, ACLU)

Scripture for Sunday, December 9, 2001 “Peace”—Second Sunday in Advent, Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD 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. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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 the LORD 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

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This 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.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him,

and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But 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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do 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. Even 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. ‘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. His 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.’”