

December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Season of Surprise”

It was the year 1914 and the place was along the Western Front, as World War I erupted throughout Europe. The specific time was early in the morning on Christmas Day. It was still dark and the fires of the camps on both sides could be seen across what was called, “No Man’s Land.” The soldiers on both sides were hunkered down in trenches, where the mud could be shin high and the protection barely effective against large shell artillery or accurately tossed hand grenades. The temperature that morning was cold enough to harden the ground between the fighters and there was a thin frost everywhere, that some say seemed to transform the warzone into a kind of wonderland. There are people who think it was because of this that a miracle of sorts took place, that the world looked different in the cold of the morning, but others point to a higher power. The miracle is known as the “Christmas Truce” and books have been written about how both German and Allied forces laid down their guns that day and met together to sing carols, share food, tell stories, and wish one another “Merry Christmas.” That morning the “No Man’s Land” became “Everyman’s Land,” and at least for one remarkable Christmas Day, along miles of the war front and involving thousands of soldiers, there was peace in the world.

Every Wednesday evening at 6:00 the door is open to the Pastor’s Bible Study, where we reflect on the scripture passage that is the focus for the coming Sunday’s message. This past week, I was preparing for the study and working with the verses we’ve heard from Isaiah. This is the place where the prophet describes the stunning way in which everything is transformed when the One sent from God comes into the world. On that day, says the prophet, predators and prey will lay down together. With the coming, says Isaiah, a threatening world will be so at peace, children will move about with no fear or risk of harm. When the One from God takes up residence in the world it will be like a new creation. Isaiah describes a glorious vision, but I found myself wracking my brain to think of an example of how the coming of Christ so dramatically changes us. This is the sad part of it, that we have to work so hard to think of examples where Jesus and God’s love through him changes us so completely. First of all, animals are still predators and prey. There’s a reason why the Heart of Africa display at the Columbus Zoo keeps visitors at a safe distance. It’s no petting zoo, that’s for sure, and it would be craziness to suggest that lions and lambs can share the same habitat. That’s not the way the world works. There is a natural order to things and the strong are always going to threaten the weak. And, of course, the animal kingdom isn’t the only place where the rules are set. In our social and political world, there are numerous examples of the survival of the fittest. These are the unspoken rules and they keep us in our place. The lines may be invisible but they are clearly drawn; lines between the rich and poor, and between those who are educated and those who are not. I wish it were an exaggeration but I don’t think it is, to describe the conflict between competing ideologies in our society as a kind of war. Traditionalists and progressives, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats; whether we are inside the church or outside of it, the coming of Christ has not yet made it possible for enemies to become friends. Maybe this is why we sometimes use language that sounds like we’ve dug trenches to “set up camps” where opposing sides are ever vigilant toward the attacks of those on the other side. So, I was thinking about Isaiah’s vision of a new world and wondering if we’ll ever get there. How grateful I was when someone in our bible study discussion said, “Wasn’t there something about World War I when the fighting stopped?” It instantly came back to me, how I’d read a book years ago by a historian telling of the day in 1914 when an unauthorized and spontaneous truce erupted in the early part of the world war. It didn’t happen because the soldiers decided to disobey orders. It didn’t happen because they were out of ammunition or that sharing food seemed like a better idea than starving in the cold. The day long truce of 1914 happened because it was Christmas Day. They were celebrating the coming of Christ and that joy opened up the reality of Christ coming again on that cold December morning. The miracle of it is our encouragement to look for the ways Christ comes now bringing a power that can change us and our world.

It’s more than a coincidence that Isaiah names the peace God makes possible in the world by pointing to the sign of a tree. In the Hebrew tradition it’s known as the “Tree of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of King David and the tree is a sign that one day God will bring a new king out of the House of David who will bring peace to the world. Isaiah said that even if the tree appears to be cut off, even if all we have is a dried up stump, we should not give up hope. The prophet says God will bring a stem of new life from that dried up wood. The beginning may seem small and the start may feel insignificant, but God will cause a new thing to grow, and roots will take hold, and God’s vision for the world will not be denied. Isaiah planted hope and the tree was the sign.

The tradition in our house is to have a real tree at Christmas. We like the smell of it and the fun of it, which is still enough to make up for the hassle of it, as we drag an increasingly dried out piece of evergreen into our family room. It’s a sign for our family that Christmas is coming and that’s true for nearly all of us who have some

connection to a tree this time of year. Instead of pulling it in from outside, some of us pull it out of a box, and some of us just store it in the corner of the basement with all the lights and decorations left on it and simply move it upstairs where it's ready to go. How we do it is not what's important. That we do it is what matters. Isaiah said a tree will be the sign. This will be our assurance that however the world is now that's not how the world has to stay. The One from God is coming and with that advent we will know that relationships can be healed, that conflicts can be resolved, that peace can be restored, and that death can lead to everlasting life.

Most of us grow up focusing on what's under the Christmas tree. On the morning of the big day we've been taught to look down to see what surprises have been delivered with our name on it. When my brother and sister and I were young our parents would have us close our eyes, as they led us to stand near the Christmas tree. Then, when the word was given, our parents would say in unison "Merry Christmas" and we'd open our eyes to see the gifts. Through the experience of a child, it seemed like the world was brand new. Well, as we grow older our expectations change. We become more practical. We see the world and others differently. Our hearts get a little more hardened and our minds a little more set. This is just the way it is. But the prophet Isaiah speaks to us, especially as we decide what is possible or not possible this Christmas. The tree, every Christmas tree, can be a sign of what God is doing. The prophet wants us not to just look down but to look up. In fact, Isaiah would say look all around and recognize how the gift of Christ's coming is working a change our lives. The stump brings forth life. There can be healing where we hurt. There can be forgiveness where we are disappointed. There can be light, even in the darkness.

For me, it took the memory of an unexpected truce between soldiers on Christmas day to be reminded that the coming of Christ isn't just about a birth in Bethlehem. What else in our lives reminds us and opens us to God? If we're not sure where to look then let the trees of Christmas be our sign. When we see them, and they are everywhere, they help us remember that Christ comes wherever we most need the gift of love. This could be now or tomorrow or wherever we wonder if life can be different. You see, it can. It can, and it will change, and maybe not all at once but it will change moment by moment. This is the gift of God for which we wait and the promise foretold by the prophet, Isaiah. "A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse...and on that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the people...and his dwelling shall be glorious." People look up, the time is near.