



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
8 December 2019
Sermon: The Peaceable Kingdom
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah 11:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

11 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The 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.

³His 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;

⁴but 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.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The 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.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They 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.

Matthew 3:1-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

3 In 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.”

Our advent candle readers read from Isaiah 11, a vision often described as Isaiah’s peaceable kingdom, where “the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.”

Here’s another, more modern vision:

Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Kurt Vonnegut's most famous novel *Slaughter-House Five*, watches a war movie in reverse, like it's a videotape being rewound. That reference is for those of you who can remember what videotapes once were. In Vonnegut's words:

It was a movie about American bombers in World War II and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this: American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered [that fire] into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes...

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.¹

Vonnegut's anti-war novel imagines humanity making instruments of peace and healing, planes that put fires out rather than dropping bombs, factories that bury explosive materials rather than creating them. It comes close to Isaiah's prophesy of wolf lying with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf and the lion and the little child. But, if you've read the novel, you know, Vonnegut's vision of the peaceable kingdom is just that, a vision, actually it's more like a delusion, witnessed by a man in the throes of PTSD. He experiences the movie backward, and sees this vision of peace, due to illness brought on by violence.

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Random House, 1969), 74-75.

What does it mean to believe and proclaim peace in our own time? Or to say, along with John the Baptist, as we do every Advent season, that “the kingdom of heaven has come near”? Is it simply an illusion or blind faith? Do we light the candle of peace every year, just to go through the motions? I wrote this sermon the day after a US sailor killed two people and himself at Pearl Harbor, the day after George Zimmerman inflicted more violence on the family of Trayvon Martin by suing them, a week after a man killed two college students with a knife in London before being shot to death by police. Each year, it seems, the peaceable kingdom recedes from view.

But the visions of Isaiah and John also came in such times. When Isaiah proclaimed the coming of a peace-making, righteous and just king, with the Spirit of the Lord resting on him, Judah was on the brink of destruction by the Assyrians, the superpower immediately to the west. Isaiah prophesized about a righteous king and the end to all violence, as he stood in the midst of faithless political leaders and threats of violence every day. Centuries later, John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of heaven when Israel was subjugated to Rome, only a few years before he and his savior would be put to death by corrupt imperial courts. And yet, the prophets proclaimed peace in their time, and they believed in peace, and looked for it, every day.

For the past week, I’ve been fascinated by a video circulating on social media. Initially, I watched it just for amusement, not realizing what it was. Three men appear in battle. The humor is in the unconventional instruments used in the scuffle. One holds a narwhal tusk – you heard that right, a narwhal tusk – as a spear while a second flails (act out) about with a fire

extinguisher, which he doesn't seem to know quite how to use. It's all very animated. No blows are landed on screen. By all appearances, it looks like a drunken brawl out of a movie.

But in reality, the moment is not frivolous; it is the deadly closing scenes of last week's knife attack in London, taking place on London bridge. The man cornered by the tusk and fire extinguisher in the video was convicted of terrorist activity in 2012, but he was out on early release. That day, he murdered two college students with a knife while wearing a fake suicide bombing vest. He was shot to death by police soon after being confronted by these civilians. Immediately after the violence, Britain's new prime minister Boris Johnson tried to ride a wave of fear and panic by calling for an end to early prison release and automatic lifetime sentences for terrorist activity. You could imagine such rhetoric and draconian measures in our own country. We've been hearing it for decades in this age of mass incarceration.

And yet, it turns out that the attack began at conference about prison reform. One of the victims of the attack was a man named Jack Merritt who was a part of the conference. He was the course coordinator for a Cambridge University program that enables prison inmates to learn alongside college students. Jack had dedicated his life to prison reform. He believed deeply in rehabilitation and second chances. When reactionist politicians tried to capitalize on his death by promoting stricter prison sentences, Jack's father called them out. He wrote on twitter: "My son, Jack, who was killed in this attack, would not wish his death to be used as the pretext for more draconian sentences." That was Jack's father, advocating for prison reform, just a few days after his son was killed by a convicted felon out on early release.²

² See Emma Goldberg, "Jack Merritt Died in the London Bridge Attack. Don't Forget What He Stood For." *The New York Times*. Dec. 1, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/33zwSV3>

And that, is the peaceable kingdom, here in our very midst. That is Isaiah's vision come alive, that is the Kingdom of heaven drawing near. Not in the cessation of all violence, not at the end of all trouble, but right in the thick of it: when someone who has every reason to want to punish, and blame, or even just to be quiet and still and mourn, nonetheless takes up his son's vision of peace, and forgiveness, and justice.

It is a sad, horrid story. I am not in any way downplaying its tragedy. The violence of that day, like the violence that seems to become more rampant and wonton every year in this country, will have devastating repercussions in the lives of those involved.

It is also an Advent story, because Advent is about our lives today, living in the already and not yet of Christ's coming to this world. In this season, we proclaim, "The wolf shall live with the lamb," and, also, not yet. "The leopard shall lie down with the kid," and, also, not yet. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," and not yet. "The kingdom of heaven has come near," and it is not here yet, in this world of violence and bloodshed.

And already. You have to look for it, but it is here, the Spirit of God, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might. It is here when a grieving parent chooses mercy and hope over fear and xenophobia. It is here when a privileged college student dedicates his life to prison reform and inmate education. It is here, right here, when you join a congregation even when you're weary, not just of all the many deep personal heartaches and worries that you bring to this place, but you're also weary of the onslaught of news, when you are sick about there being more guns in this country than people,³ about there being more

³ Christopher Ingraham. "There are More Guns than People in the United States, According to a New Study of Global Firearm Ownership." *The Washington Post*. June 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/>

mass shootings than days this year,⁴ about there being more imprisoned people today here in this country than any other country or in any other time.⁵ That spirit is here already, when we come together, and we light this candle, and we proclaim the peace of God, the peace of God, the peace of God, and we believe it. And that happens not just here, but in congregations all over the world today, proclaiming peace, already and not yet.

Friends, believe in the already and not yet of God's peace. Find it within yourselves, and your communities. Especially at your lowest. When you are ready to disengage, throw up your hands, turn off the news. When you're tempted to bury yourself in the cynicism spreading all over this country today, remember the already and not yet of God's peace. Because the spirit that Isaiah proclaimed is real and loose and working among and within us. Because we are not just spectators but actors in the peaceful vision of God.⁶ Because the "kingdom of heaven has come near." The kingdom of heaven is near. Amen.

wp/2018/06/19/there-are-more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership/

⁴ Jason Silverstein. "There Have Been More Mass Shootings than Days this Year." *CBS News*. Dec. 1, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-mass-shootings-than-days-so-far-this-year/>

⁵ Drew Khan, "5 Facts Behind America's High Incarceration Rate." *CNN*. April 21, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/28/us/mass-incarceration-five-key-facts/index.html>

⁶ A helpful reminder from David Davis. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A, Vol. 1*. Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 21.