

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church - December 5, 2010

Sermon "Prepare the way" - The Rev. Douglas Kendall

Lord God,

May the words o my mouth,.

And the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts

Be acceptable to you, our God and our guide. AMEN.

Peace.

This is the Sunday of peace in the season of advent.

How can there be peace in a time when there is so much upheaval?

The Ivory Coast in Africa is in a state of emergency,

With an election that fell well below any standard for fair and free.

Last night they were under a curfew because of rioting in the streets.

Sounds a lot like Haiti as well where last Sunday's election

has been called a sham by most observers,

and there could quite likely be rioting in the streets.

On Monday six more NATO soldiers were killed in Afghanistan.

In Israel they are battling the worst wildfire in recorded history.

Peace.

Not likely any time soon in our world it appears.

More like chaos.

Sometimes it feels like our world is spinning out of control doesn't it?

What next?

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.

Sometimes the Bible says things that we just cannot believe.

This just sounds like even more chaos

The wolf lying down with the lamb?

A cow and a bear grazing together?

The lion eating straw like an ox?

Just not possible.

The wolf is born a hunter.

The cow has a digestive system built for grazing.

The lion needs fresh meat to survive.

And the idea of a little toddler putting its hand
in the den of a poisonous snake?

Can you imagine letting your children or grandchildren do that?

What is the prophet Isaiah thinking?

And besides, what has this to do with Advent?

When Isaiah spoke these words,

his country of Judah was in political turmoil.

It had split with the other tribes of Israel long before.

Those tribes joined with another country called Syria,

and tried to put pressure on Judah to conform to the ways of their world,
to change to be like the rest of their society.

Meanwhile, to the south, Egypt seemed ready to attack.

And to the east, Assyria reputedly the most brutally violent nation in history,
was certain to attack.

It was just a question of when.

Judah was a small country,

surrounded by powerful and unfriendly neighbours.

And it was governed by kings lacking in faith or vision or competence,

Or perhaps all three.

How could the people remain faithful to their God

when even the king had installed a pagan altar
in the temple at Jerusalem?

(It would be as if we turned the communion table into black jack table,
and our sanctuary into a Sports Bar.)

So the message of Isaiah was one of judgment.

He wasn't shy about saying, "This is not how God intended his people to live."

Like John the Baptist many years later,

he was ready to tell them what was wrong, and what had to change.

But he also recognized that the politics of the time was not a game.

While the kings were preparing for battle,

the ordinary people were going hungry,
justice was being put aside, and there was no peace.
Was there no word from God for them?

Here Isaiah begins to talk about a new kind of king,
one who will walk in the ways of God, and rule with integrity.
Isaiah is talking about the messiah.
The people looked around them and saw only devastation
and a future with no reason at all for hope.
Isaiah saw the same things as they did,
But in the midst of it, Isaiah could also see hope.

Look at that dead stump, Isaiah says.
Nothing left but that stump after a tree which once was mighty,
Has now been cut to the ground.
But look again.
Something is alive there.
A shoot has started to grow.
New life is coming to the tree.

There is hope for Israel and their hope is in God.
It is then that Isaiah becomes poetic,
and starts to talk about the lions and bears
and snakes acting peculiarly.
He knows as well as you and I how animals behave.
But he wants to get our attention.

He tells them:
Don't think of God in the ordinary, practical way you always have.
God far exceeds your imagination and your expectations.
He is not limited by your boundaries.
He can turn a desert... into a garden.
He can overrule the violence and evil that surrounds you.
He can bring peace.
Even when there appears to be no hope,
there is still hope, because there is God.
Even when there is no peace,
there is still peace because there is God.

Like John the Baptist, Isaiah called for repentance and change
from every level of society, from the king to the people of the land.
But with this call for a new way of living,

there is also the promise of a new life,
where the kingdom and the power and the glory
would belong to God, and even nature would live in harmony.

Out of the stump of Jesse
out of the stump of what is left of God's great nation Israel,
there shall come new life and new hope.

Do you remember who Jesse was?

Jesse was King David's father.

Out of the house and lineage of David, hope will come.

We come to the worship today,
aware of so much that is wrong and evil and corrupt in our world.

We come longing for a better world, for a better life.

And what do we find in God?

We find acceptance,
in spite of all our failings.

We find forgiveness,
in spite of our unwillingness to accept it.

We find promise and hope for a better way,
in spite of our pessimism of today.

We find peace,
Even in a world that seems to have no peace.

We come to worship today longing for the day, as did Isaiah, when:

"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."

Maybe the good news for God's people from so long ago
is our good news as well.

Even though things around us seem to deny God's rule a lot of the time,
there is hope that one day the lion will lie down with the lamb,
and there will be peace in our world.

Out of stump of Jesse, through his son David,
and out of the house and lineage of David
springs forth new life, new hope, and peace for us all.

As we journey through Advent,
may God bless us with his vision of the future
and with signs of hope and peace.

As we anticipate Jesus coming and his coming again,
may we have eyes to see God's vision of the future
unfolding around us and in us,
and may we work towards God's future and live it in our lives today.

In Jesus name. Amen.