

*"Peace Is a Ribbon"*

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*Reading: Isaiah 10.1-11*

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,  
    who write oppressive statutes,  
to turn aside the needy from justice  
    and to rob the poor of my people of their right,  
that widows may be your spoil,  
    and that you may make the orphans your prey!  
What will you do on the day of punishment,  
    in the calamity that will come from far away?  
To whom will you flee for help,  
    and where will you leave your wealth,  
so as not to crouch among the prisoners  
    or fall among the slain?  
For all this, his anger has not turned away;  
    his hand is stretched out still.

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—  
    the club in their hands is my fury!  
Against a godless nation I send him,  
    and against the people of my wrath I command him,  
to take spoil and seize plunder,  
    and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.  
But this is not what he intends,  
    nor does he have this in mind;  
but it is in his heart to destroy,  
    and to cut off nations not a few.  
For he says:  
'Are not my commanders all kings?  
Is not Calno like Carchemish?

Is not Hamath like Arpad?  
Is not Samaria like Damascus?  
As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols  
whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria,  
shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols  
what I have done to Samaria and her images?

### *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 axe 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.'

*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

You have to have a bit of sympathy for the Pharisees and Sadducees in this story. As far as the historians can make out, they were pretty good people for the most part, and in their different ways observant and serious in their religious practice. The Sadducees were an elite group, often well-to-do and prominent in society. Religiously conservative, and politically influential, they were the leaders in the Temple, and they especially honoured the written word of the scriptures. Pharisees were more middle class (in our terms). Their approach to faith liked to wrestle with oral as well as written traditions in the Jewish faith, and they emphasized the importance of study and fidelity to the Jewish law. At the time of this story they are the leaders of a movement that will ultimately replace the Temple cult with the synagogue practices of prayer and shared reading that evolved into modern Judaism. The two groups didn't agree with each other, but they were serious God-fearing people of good intention and sincere practice.

So they didn't really need to hear a new prophet, preaching out in the wilderness by the Jordan. They could have stayed home that morning. We have to assume that these Pharisees and Sadducees were drawn by something - they thought they might hear something valuable, something new. They earnestly set out for a long walk on a hot day, to be jostled by crowds and burned by the sun. And what do they get from the prophet? 'You brood of vipers!' John rails at them. 'Do you think anyone, least of all, God cares about your fine religious tradition? The ax is lying at the root of the tree.' It's a long way to go for a tongue-lashing.

Perhaps we identify a bit. After all, it's Christmas time, or getting there. We are lighting candles for hope and peace, next week joy, and then love. We've got our Advent appeal going, and our collections of toys and socks, and we are planning beautiful worship services and a really nice party for families new to Canada. And we are the ones that are in church. Where's the hope in the axe? Where's the peace in the unquenchable fire?

For us as for them, John's message is disturbing, but sort of exciting. John knows what they are longing for. He knows as well as they do what the promise of Isaiah is. John and his listeners will have known by heart the passage that Skip read. Someone is coming upon whom the spirit of God rests, someone with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and might. And when this happens, the peaceable kingdom will ensue. We all have a mental picture of it, whether it is based on the paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker Edward Hicks, or on the many sweet photos circulating on the internet of a tiger nursing piglets, or a mouse napping with a cat. In Isaiah's word picture, the wolf and the lamb will live in harmony, cow and bear graze together, and the children playing near the snakes will not be in danger. In the peaceable kingdom it won't even matter if the Pharisees and Sadducees are vipers.

The thing is, John says, you really can't get there from here. It just isn't going to happen. And the necessary corrective is going to be quite harsh. You've got to repent he says, and bear good fruit, fruit worthy of repentance. As we talked in lectionary this week about the phrase 'good fruits', Emily reflected that fruit is both nourishing in itself and also carries seeds in it, seeds for future growth and unknown possibility.

But to bear this fruit, you've got to let yourself be pruned. Personally and collectively. Everything about you that is unproductive has to be slashed away and burned. There are tough times ahead. But after the pruning, a shoot may come up from an old stump, and the fruit of a pruned tree will be large and sweet. John the Baptist calls out in the wilderness "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" such strident urgency, and sets us to the task. But the task is to clear the way for the Prince of Peace. To create a place for that peaceable kingdom to flourish. If peace is to be a ribbon encircling the earth, as our children's hymn this morning puts it, one of the fruits of our repentance will have to be *shalom*, as Art would have said. A rich and fertile peace, far more than the absence of conflict. Something that is nourishing in itself and also holds seeds in it for the future.

Many years ago, during the years we lived in Guatemala, I participated in a meeting of all the CIDA staff posted in Latin America. It was an inspiring time in many ways – the civil war in El Salvador just over, the insurgency in Guatemala

moving toward peace talks, in Peru the Sendero Luminoso had become less active, there was a glimmer of hope in Colombia, a surprisingly free election in Nicaragua, and some pretty interesting developments in Ecuador and Bolivia, as I recall. The term post-conflict peace building was newly minted. At that time almost all Canadian aid in the region was focused on human rights and democratic development, and the speaker at our meeting was a senior Canadian military man who was very active in Canada's 'peacebuilding' identity. He said, (I think at the time in reference to Colombia, but applicable much more broadly), "You can have peace and you can have justice, but you can't have them both at once." If you want peace, there is going to have to be justice. You just have to put in the effort toward justice, or the peace will not hold. His words have stayed with me all these years because I think what he said was true. It's true around the world and we see it played out all the time, in Latin America, in Palestine, in the Philippines. And actually it's true closer to home too, in our own lives, and our own families. You can't just tell everybody to shut up and stop fighting.

They won't stop fighting because they are afraid. They are afraid of being harmed. They are afraid of being left, or discounted. They are afraid because they remember previous wounds. They are afraid because they think the future will bring more anguish. The main thing that stands between us and peace is fear.

It's the absence of fear that distinguishes the peaceable kingdom. Safe toddlers, the fatling calf not afraid of the lion, letting a child go first. Whether you are talking about the streets of Toronto, or a very personal relationship of your own, or the United Nations Security Council, this is a simple fact: until the fear is acknowledged and addressed, there will be no possibility for justice or for peace.

Advent is a time in the Christian year in which we make a point of remembering and facing fear. No less than four times in the telling of the story of Jesus' birth, the message is 'fear not.' First Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, then Mary, then Joseph, and finally the shepherds are all given assurance. Into the darkness of a long night comes a whisper from God. You are going to be alright. You can do this. God's work is greater than convention, and more wonderful than our expectations.

This morning we sang with the children,

Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,  
giving a promise of safety and worth.

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong.

And none shall be afraid.

And none shall be afraid. May it be so. Amen.