



Pipedream or Sacred Promise?
Sermon Preached by Anne Ledbetter
December 5, 2010
Scripture – Isaiah 11: 1-10

Recent news lies heavy on our hearts:

North Korea bombed a South Korean island, killing two civilians.

Israeli bulldozers and armed soldiers continue to demolish Palestinian homes across the West Bank.

Hunger and war still claim victims among our sisters and brothers in the Congo.

At least 45 U.S. troops were killed in Afghanistan last month – making it the deadliest November since the war began over nine years ago.

Tuesday a suicide bomber blew himself up near a police van in northwest Pakistan killing six people and wounding 17 others.

Shot in the back by burglars in her home this week, Dawn Dollard, age 42, became Wilmington's 27th homicide victim this year.

Given the state of our world, Isaiah's picturesque oracle describing God's peaceable kingdom seems like nothing more than a pipedream. Unfortunately, we cannot imagine a world where Republicans and Democrats can work together in Congress, much less a society where the wolf romps playfully in the pasture with the lamb. Some days we cannot conceive of peace in our homes and families, much less of the calf and lion eating from the same trough.

Yet today Isaiah brings us this unbelievable vision of God's shalom, insisting it is not a pipedream, but a divine promise. Listen again:

A shoot *shall* come out of the stump of Jesse;

The spirit of the Lord *shall* rest on him.

Righteousness *shall* be the belt around his waist.

The wolf *shall* lie with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

and a little child *shall* lead them.

Finally, the root of Jesse *shall* stand as a signal to the peoples; and his dwelling *shall* be glorious.

Did you notice how many times the word *shall* appears? Shall indicates that something will happen – it obliterates any if's, and's or but's. God's shalom and ultimate peace is not a fantasy but a sacred promise to be fulfilled.

As Christians we identify Jesus as the shoot from the stump of Jesse, the one who judged the poor with justice and favored the meek of the earth. We believe that in Jesus, God has revealed the way of peace. Jesus embodied God's love, and established the peaceable kingdom. In today's text Isaiah delivers to the Hebrews the promise of a divine ruler sent from God; and we believe that ruler has come.

Have you heard about the random act of culture on October 30th in the Macy's store in downtown Philadelphia? I believe one or more of our choristers participated in that surreptitious act. In the midst of holiday shopping, people heard the strains of organ music and suddenly a voice sang out, and then scattered voices joined in, singing Handel's Hallelujah chorus.

This week I received an email with the YouTube link to a similar scene – this one from November 13th in Niagara Falls, Canada. The video opens on a food court in a mall, where people of all ages are eating burgers and fast food, as a Santa wannabe plays Jingle Bells on a nearby piano. Then the music changes - an organ bles, probably piped in over the loud speakers, and suddenly a young woman holding a cell phone stands up and bursts forth in the opening "Hallelujah!" in a beautiful soprano voice. Across the way a scruffy guy in a sweatshirt picks up a few measures later with his gorgeous tenor *Hallelujah*. Then a couple along the side, and a maintenance worker, holding a yellow **Caution wet floor** sign, scoot forward belting out their Hallelujahs too. Most onlookers sit mesmerized with faces reflecting curiosity then delight.

I continue to wonder how the crowds in Macy's and the Niagara Falls food court heard the lyrics:

*The kingdom of this world
Is become the kingdom of our Lord,
And of His Christ, And He shall reign forever and ever...*

It's enough to make us ponder: "What if Christ ruled the hearts of all people? What if Christ ruled the hearts of world leaders? What if Christ ruled the hearts of all Christians? What if Christ ruled the hearts of all Presbyterians? What if we at Westminster truly let Christ rule our hearts? What would happen? Perhaps we would live each day looking out for ways to bring justice to the poor and marginalized, to propagate forgiveness, to comfort those in distress.

Can you imagine what miracles God might work *in* us and *through* us?

The peaceable kingdom is both Now, and Not Yet, so at times we catch blessed glimpses of God's unfolding realm of shalom. Indeed, sprouts of compassion are already bearing fruit in our world.

Have you heard of The Giving Pledge? This year Microsoft mogul Bill Gates and billionaire investor Warren Buffett launched a campaign to get other American billionaires to give away at least half their wealth.

Buffett, decided to give 99 percent of his \$46 billion fortune to charity – three fourths going to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which seeks to wipe out diseases like malaria worldwide, and to support the education of children. Underlying their work is the conviction that every human life is of equal value.

Some suggest that Ted Turner spearheaded The Giving Pledge by announcing that he was giving the majority of his wealth to the UN Foundation to eliminate poverty and to the NTI – Nuclear Threat Initiative which aims to dismantle nuclear arms. Though he claims to be agnostic, Ted Turner sees the

necessity for peace, believes in the work for peace, and feels the urgent calling to make peace. I daresay he is following in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace more faithfully than most professing Christians.

Whenever Presbyterians are ordained to church office as deacons, elders or ministers, we are required to answer a set of ordination questions. It seems to me this question may be the most important one:

Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world? [Book of Order W-4.4003(f)]

Talk about a summary of our marching orders as disciples!

Follow Christ,
love our neighbors,
and work for the reconciliation of the world!

Maybe we do not have billions to give to the UN or Gates Foundation, but we can pledge to the church and give a portion of our estate to Westminster's endowment or another organization working for justice for all God's children. Maybe we do not have the ear of the President, but we can write our senators and encourage them to approve the START treaty.

Sprigs of hope are bringing us closer to God's realm of shalom. Just this week the DE chapter of Churches for Middle East Peace raised money to put an ad in the News Journal, urging support for the Middle East Peace Process and calling upon members of congress to work with the President and Secretary of State in advocating a just peace in Israel Palestine.

This year some Westminster members have been meeting with a group of devout Muslims to share faith and friendship and build bridges of mutual understanding, respect, and yes, even partnership in peacemaking. Do you see tendrils of hope in your life?

As disciples we have opportunities to serve meals to the hungry through Emmanuel Dining Room, to mentor a child through Urban Promise, to bring tidings of comfort and joy to those in need by filling the Christmas boxes, to host the homeless here in our church with Family Promise, to give gifts to Christ this Christmas by feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, clothing the naked, and glorifying God through peacemaking.

Why is this work ours? Because that is our calling as children of God and as followers of Christ. This year marks the 30th anniversary of *Peacemaking: The Believer's Calling*, a document of the Presbyterian Church which explains why peacemaking is crucial and critical to a life of faith. Early on, the document reads: "Peace is more than the absence of war, more than a precarious balance of powers. Peace is the intended order of the world with life abundant for all God's children. Peacemaking, is the calling of the Christian church, for Christ is our peace who has made us one through his body."

Friends, Christ calls us to follow him into the world, doing justice and showing kindness so that Isaiah's prophecy sounds less like a pipedream and more like a beckoning, glorious dream.

It is a high and awesome calling of every disciple, every child of God.

We begin by planting seeds of peace at home, in our schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. What inspires us? This sacred promise which belongs to the people of God. What helps us? The Spirit of Christ moving among us.

For you see, we have a Prince of Peace who feeds us so that we may become

a tendril of hope,
a sprout of compassion,
a shoot of justice,
a seedling of shalom.