"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

According to the calendar we are about as far as we can be from Christmas so let’s hear one of our favourite Christmas passages. Its a prophecy from Isaiah 9:6 “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
“Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace” isn’t that lovely. My mind goes to the Beatitudes when Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God” Peace certainly sounds divine, something we should aspire to and then we get to today’s reading which is taken from Jesus’ instructions to his disciples before he sends them into the mission field. And we hear "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

The peace of God that passes all understanding, the peace of which Jesus is the Peace is the divine peace which exists in the Kingdom of God. It is not the banal, “I guess its peace cause no one’s fighting” peace of this world. To usher in God’s peace Jesus knew was going to take some work; it’s going to take a sword

Jesus came to offer, no offer is too soft a word, he came to usher in the kingdom of God which is diametrically opposed to the sin , selfishness and hurt common to this world of wilful humans. It is precisely because Jesus came preaching love that it is easy to assume he came as a gentle, calming influence. But as this is a world rife with hate his message of love came as a head on collision. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Last week we talked about the truth that as a Christian you are a Chosen people. I suggested that we are chosen; like Jesus, like his first disciples to do two things; preach the gospel and be an active healing agent. As we move closer to Jesus, as you allow yourself to molded into his image we will come into friction with this world. This is the message we heard Jesus give to his disciples today. It is a tough lesson and hard to hear. As we move further into Christ we will be moving further from this world.

There is a cost to being a Christian and sometimes that cost shows up in our families and among those we love. This is not a lesson that I believe most of you needs to re-learn. You know that by simply being a Christian and trying to live out the gospel you will brush uncomfortably against people in your life. This is what Jesus meant, in part, when he said that he came to bring a sword. That sword will cut you away from this world and that will hurt. This sword will, from time to time cleave you from family and friends (at least for a while) and that will hurt. I actually believe that the same sword will eventually sever whole parts of yourself away and *that* is the hardest cut of all. This is what I want to touch on today.

Here, Jesus is pointing out the truth that as we move into him as we walk further along our Christian journey we will of necessity leave behind our old life. This is the most dramatic aspect of the sword imagery, the metaphoric severing of our “real self” from our “old self”.

Allow me here to step over to Paul’s letter to the Romans which we also heard this morning. If you read it or listened to Bev read it for us you heard Paul talk a great deal about dying. Most profoundly Paul wrote, “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

Its this old self that Paul is talking about when he talks about our dying. By “old self” he means all of those things in us that we will not be taking into God’s eternal kingdom. This is the point in my sermon where I’d like to make a switch from tradition.

Traditionally today’s readings are preached as a warning against the sins we commit. One hears Jesus talk about how hard it is to be a follower of his as it entails allowing the cutting away of our worldly ways and then traditionally the preacher offers up a holy list of all the things which we must cut away and leave behind.

In my imaginings I can see centuries of these scary old preachers with big beards and bad teeth raising their voice and shaking their fingers. “Ye must die to your sinful self! (I don’t know why he’s Scottish in my imagination, but he is) Ye must cut away the lust in yer heart. You must stop covetin’ yer neighbour’s donkey. Ye must cut out the malice and the hate!” I see him just a awayin’ as he lists off our evils.”

To be fair there is nothing particularly wrong with this type of sermon I suppose but honestly... It’s a lovely summer weekend, you’re sitting at home do you really want a reminder of all the hurtful behaviour you’ve got to work on?

So what I thought might be pleasant to do this morning would be to look at the other side of the same coin. Yes, as we move toward and into God’s kingdom we must and will sever off all hurtful ways but how about we consider the things in our life that we will keep. Let’s focus a moment on some of the stuff of life that is “kingdom worthy” that we will take into eternity.

When, after three months of Covid protocol separation you can go visit you kid’s house and have your grandchildren rush straight into your arms and you can hold them extra close and kiss the top of their head… this feeling, this love, you get to carry into eternity.

Look at your life partner or bring them to mind. Do you remember (take a moment now) do you remember the first moment you realized, “Oh my God he loves me! He loves me!” This is kingdom worthy.

When you cradle a newborn baby in your arms, maybe this child is yours, maybe not but some part of you wants to round your back and shoulders protectively over the child. This deep, inate sense of “I am going to protect this tiny human with every fibre of my being. There’s a world of hurt out there but child right her, right now I’ve got you and I’m going to protect you.” That is self-giving love and that is very much kingdom worthy.

I think back to a crowded family dinner table in my youth. “Mom you don’t have a pork chop on your plate.” “OH, I’m not hungry I was picking away while I was cooking”. Only years later you realize that there wasn’t enough meat to go around that day and mom was going to make sure her kids all got something. That’s self-sacrificial love and that, we take with us to glory.

Sitting with someone dear to you and telling them that something they did or said hurt you. Then listening to them as they explain and apologize. Then for the sake of the bond you share and the future you want you forgive them. Both ends of this conversation are the height of kingdom worthy.

One more, the little girl who arrives home from school only to have her mom say “You’re late today.” “Yes” the child replies, “Katy broke her doll on the way home. “Oh, said mom, and you stopped to help her fix it?” “No, I can’t fix a broken doll but I sat beside her a while and helped her cry.” Kingdom worthy.

So as we hear Jesus tough talk today let’s take it to heart. As we allow ourselves to be drawn into Jesus we permit ourselves to be severed from the sin and hurt of this world. To become our Real selves, our healed, restored kingdom selves we must sever away all of that is in us which is selfish and hurt-causing. Most of us know what we need to let die.

So let’s also take time on this beautiful morning, to recognize the beauty that God has placed around and within us. Let’s celebrate and give thanks for all that we see in ourselves and each other that is already kingdom worthy; the joy, and the peace and the forgiveness and the self-giving love. This is the stuff of life, this is the stuff of God and this is the stuff that we will have for eternity. Amen