



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“The Long Walk to Freedom”

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

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

And 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. 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.

The metaphorical vision of the world as it will surely be when, in the fullness of time, God's peace, which surpasses our understanding comes, and dwells in our hearts, and fills our minds, and enters into all our relationships. Isaiah had this great vision at a time when his world was on fire. The Assyrian army had long since taken over the north, had risen and fallen and now the Babylonian empire was breathing down their necks. And this poor, beleaguered people, run over at the rise and fall of every neighbouring empire was about to be run over again. In the midst of this, he has a vision of peace, a beautiful vision, a kind of Eden-like vision. Could it be that some day a leader will rise and take us to that place, fulfill that vision?

It is a vision that arises in every generation, the vision of peace. And in every generation there are people who catch the vision, feel the longing for our lives, our society to more fully embody the vision.

Well I want you to hear something. It is a clip from Nelson Mandela's address to the people after he was released from his 27 years in prison...

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On this week in which we light the candle of peace, and in which we hear again the great vision of peace, and in which we hear again the cry of the prophet John reminding us that the kingdom of God has come near, I cannot help but think of Nelson Mandela, and think that for us too, the vision of a world of peace, and a great maker of peace has come near to us. We mourn his death. We stand with his people in their grief. And we celebrate a truly radiant life which shone with the light of peace.

It is one thing to hold a vision of peace in your heart and mind. It is another altogether to have a convictions about how it will come about. John the Baptist had an idea of how it would come about. In his day, under brutal Roman occupation, he watched as Zealots in the hills, guerillas really, tried to take up arms against the Romans. They got habitually squashed. He watched as the spiritual Essenes, the ones that wrote the Dead Sea scrolls, cloistered themselves away and tried to create the perfect little communities of peace, but did not effect the oppression at all. He watched as some of the leaders made trade offs with the Romans- tried bargaining. That never worked. He came to the conclusion nothing we humans try will work but that some day peace would come, but only when God had had enough, and would bring about an apocalypse- a great clean-up. The spirits would muster, and our job was to simply be ready for that great and glorious day.

Jesus had a different idea of how that great day of peace would come. Unlike John, who said God would do it from the outside, he said things like, "the Kingdom of God is within you."

He showed them what it was like when rich and poor, the outcast and the honoured sat together at table, shared the same bread, drank from the same cup, and became real, spiritual and physical community with each other. He believed that God would achieve the peaceable kingdom, but he said that God would do this within and through us. He showed us that it is a matter of the heart and a matter of real social and economic, political justice- "where your treasure is, there also is your heart." "love The Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbor as yourself." "Whenever you do this to the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you do it to me." "Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you." I could go on and on and on. The gospel vision of peace is participatory, it is God's peace sparked, inspired, kindled to flame within and between us, as Isaiah said in another place, "beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks."

Friends we lost a great and rare spirit this week in Nelson Mandela. We lost someone who embodied some of the greatest elements of the human spirit. His life is a living witness to the power of God to transform, the power of hope to sustain, the power of love to overcome, the power of God to bring about the peace we long for in our hearts. His life bears witness to the truth of Jesus' vision of how God's peace happens in this world. It does not happen by people waiting around for God to sweep in from the outside. It does not happen without us, just as the end of apartheid could not have happened without an amazing convergence of vision and purpose and commitment from around the globe, sparked by Mandela and others who gave their lives to the vision- the ideals for which he hoped to live and for which he was willing to die. It happens when we come to realize that our life matters, that we are here for a reason, that God has matched us up with this time, this moment, and that the peace of God, Shalom, which is love and justice, mercy and forgiveness, hope and peace all rolled into one, that kind of peace is in our hands.

So friends, look into those eyes. These are the eyes of one who has walked a long, arduous, and joyous walk to freedom along the sometimes gruelling path of peace. These are the eyes of one who, like Jesus, knew that some things are so important that we want to live for them, and we are willing to die for them. These are the eyes of one who, like Jesus, knew that peace is something we can't always command, but that we can't just wait for either. These are the eyes of one who, like Jesus calls each one of us to believe in the vision of a different world, a more just, a more peaceful one. These are the eyes of one who, like Jesus, calls you to find a way to participate in the advent of that great, divine peaceful world. I'm going to give him the last word today.

"Death is something inevitable. When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace. I believe I have made that effort and that is, therefore, why I will sleep for the eternity." "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

Amen.