

The Promise of Peace
Isaiah 11:1-10
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How about that vision from Isaiah? Beautiful! But do you think it's really possible? I did until I became the step-father to Daisy, Violet, Sage, Basil, Olive, and Lexi, the six chickens that live in our backyard. Chickens have to be the most defenseless animals on the planet. Everything wants to kill chickens. Racoons. Possums. Hawks The dogs next door. Colonel Sanders. Zaxby's. Other chickens. One day we put some leftover shredded chicken outside...and the chickens ate it. Cannibals! It's amazing the species has survived. And yet, as Isaiah promises, "the racoon will lie down with the chicken." Or something like that.

As we continue our look at the promises of the prophets, today we focus on Isaiah's vision of peace. This passage is typically read at this time of year, which seems appropriate since the weeks leading up to Christmas are when we most need to be reminded of peace. Why is it that, as we get closer to the arrival of the Prince of Peace, our lives and our world seem more chaotic and violent? Peace is especially hard to imagine as we come to the end of this year, but I feel like we say that every year. Every year it feels like things are getting worse, our country is getting more divided, the world is becoming more self-destructive. Listen to what one preacher wrote: "We are nearing the end of what has been a very difficult year, one of the most troubled I can remember in my lifetime. The political divide is wider than ever. People are getting sick and can't get healthcare. Terrorism has been rampant. Violence is increasing, and the forces of law and order seem more and more helpless to control it." That was written in 1985. Every year we think things can't get any worse, and then the next year happens.

Which makes Isaiah's vision seem blissful and quaint, but in no way attainable. He describes a world that seems to be directly opposite of ours, a world that is peaceful because of the fairness and righteousness of its ruler, a world where adversaries live in harmony with each other. I can't even imagine that kind of peace, a peace not coerced by the threat of violence. Too often, that's the condition for peace in our world. I can remember how my grandfather used to threaten us kids. When we would start acting a fool or disobeying, he would say, "I'm gonna get the yardstick!" And peace would reign in his kingdom. Now, in a bajillion years my grandfather would have never used that yardstick on us. He didn't have to. Peace is often coerced through the threat of violence.

Isn't that the way the world works? In the movies, heroes restore peace through fighting back. The good guys don't show grace and mercy to the bad guys; they kill them. It's called "restorative violence," and it is so engrained in our culture. And to be fair, the Bible does its part to contribute to this. After all, David doesn't invite Goliath over for chamomile tea and a Brene Brown TED Talk. He pilots a stone right to his temple. Peace through real or threatened violence is simply a part of our world, which makes Isaiah's passage seem like a good idea for a wall hanging but impossible to achieve.

When I was in seminary, I had this one guy in my group named Jeff. Jeff was one of the younger boys and was also small in stature, so he did what so many boys his age do. He tried to make up for his deficiencies by talking bigger. He was always talking about how he could beat anybody at anything and would often playfully threaten the older and bigger boys, who treated him like a pesky gnat that constantly buzzed around them. One day, Jeff was talking rather aggressively about how he could beat up anyone who challenged him, so I looked him in the eye

and said, “Listen, Jeff. All you talk about is violence. From now on, I only want to hear Peace Talk from you!” And from that moment on, Jeff had a new nickname: everyone in the group called him Peace Talk. Our world needs more peace talk today.

So how do we get there? Where do we even start? Isaiah gives us a vision of a world saturated with shalom, which is the Jewish concept of harmony, the weaving together of God humans, and all creation in justice and delight. But to get there, the first step is to acknowledge that the way the world is now isn’t the way God created the world to be. We have to name the places in our world where violence is lifted up as the norm and say that this isn’t how it’s supposed to be. That’s tough because violence, even the redemptive kind is everywhere. I love “Die Hard” as much as anyone – and it absolutely is a Christmas movie – and I’ll be the first in line to see the next Marvel movie when it comes out, but we also have to acknowledge the influence such movies have on our resistance to violence. How do we live for peace as followers of Christ in a world where there is very little peace talk and even less action?

That is what Isaiah’s promise reminds us to do, to make sure we are cultivating peace in our lives. Very soon, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. Jesse, a simple shepherd, was the father of King David, and is a reminder of the humble beginnings of that king, and of the coming king, Jesus Christ. By the time Jesus was born, David’s kingdom, once powerful and respected, had been chopped down by the Roman Empire to virtually nothing, a stump of its former self. And yet, out of that stump, a small shoot, no bigger than a twig, will come forth and bear the kind of fruit that will make the cow lie down with the bear. This won’t be a great oak or towering sequoia we’ll see; just a small shoot, as fragile and vulnerable as a little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. Likewise, it won’t be big, grand gestures on our part that will bring about Isaiah’s peace, but the small acts of kindness and grace that reminds each other who we were created to be.

Author Ryan LaMothe tells the story of Gerda Klein, a Holocaust survivor. As the war was ending, her Nazi guards were intent on killing as many Jews as possible before the Americans arrived, so they gathered all the remain Jews in their camp into a warehouse filled with explosives. The guards fled, thinking the building would explode, but the rain had shorted the electrical connections. Gerda was able to squeeze her frail frame out of the building just as a jeep pulled up and an American officer jumped out to greet her. She explained the situation and the two of them went to the warehouse to free the rest of the Jews. When they got the warehouse, the American officer reached out and opened the door for Greta. She said that, in that small act, when set against atrocities she had endured, her faith in humanity was restored.

We’re not going to change the world by opening the door for someone. Isaiah’s vision of peace won’t come about because we let someone into a line of traffic or we thanked a server for doing a good job. The lion and the lamb won’t start playing together just because we said, “I’m sorry” or extended grace instead of starting an argument. But if we don’t start with the small things, how will we ever bring about change in this world?

The authors of the Bible know the challenge we are facing here. Even though Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers” in the Beatitudes, that blessing sometimes feels like its not enough to sustain us as we seek to make peace. Paul offers disclaimers to this call when he says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” It’s as if Paul had just watched “Die Hard” and say to himself, “Boy, this ‘working for peace’ isn’t gonna be easy.” Paul knows that God’s peace is elusive, and yet that’s not a reason to stop working for it.

Theologian Walter Bruggemann says, “The rhetoric of peace serves as an important function in keeping available a vision of an alternative society in an alternative world.” We have

to keep talking about peace and lifting up Isaiah's vision so that we don't forget what peace looks like, so we don't forget what Christ brings us at Christmas, so that we don't forget that violence and conflict isn't the way it's supposed to be. We continue to lift up this vision so we are reminded of what we are working toward.

Peace will not come through force or coercion; it will come through sacrifice, something as small as letting someone else go first in line or paying for the person's drink behind you or loving someone even when they're being a grinch. When the resurrected Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace be with you," his next act was to show them his wounds, his pierced hands and side. We are all wounded, aren't we? Christ's peace will not come from inflicting more wounds, but from helping each other heal. It's hard to hate a fellow sufferer. As Buddhist nun Pembra Chodron said, "The way to stop war is to stop hating the enemy." That may not make for a great superhero movie, but it sure would make for a more peaceful world.

So, we're left with this promise from Isaiah, that a shoot will come from the stump of Jesse, a ruler who will judge with righteousness and treat the poor fairly. Maybe that's a place for us to start, to follow the example of how Jesus treated others and worked for peace. He did so by standing up for the powerless, but courageously speaking out against injustice, by encouraging a life of grace and sacrifice, by not being afraid to incur wounds for the sake of God's kingdom.

Honestly, I don't know if Isaiah's vision will ever come to fruition. It seems so, so far away from where our world is today. At times, working toward God's peace feels like a wasted effort. I wonder if the disciples felt that way when they heard that Jesus had been crucified, a victim of the violence of the empire. But they didn't give up on Jesus' vision, and through their perseverance experienced the joy of resurrection.

We can just throw our hands up, give in, decide there's really nothing we can do about our broken world. Or, we can follow Jesus' lead, trust in Jesus' promises, and start working for peace. A lion and a lamb together? Enemies getting along? And end to war and violence? As the angel told an incredulous Mary, "For nothing will be impossible with God."