

Wrestling with Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13

Good Morning Church Family and good morning to our church family who are joining us online this morning. We're continuing our journey through the waiting season, the advent season, for Christ to come.

Our Old Testament reading from this morning is likely another familiar one for many people. Isaiah's prophecy tells of a time when peace will reign over the earth, when conflict and violence will be no more, all thanks to the reign of a mighty king, the one who will lead, judge and love the earth in the ways of God. Some of the most striking images in this text are in verses 6-10, "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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy at all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

Although I've read or heard these verses probably a hundred times during my life, I was struck for the first time by the cast of characters, and how each pairing in these verses are creatures who, by their very nature, are opposed to one another. The wolf and the

lamb. The leopard and the kid, the baby goat. The calf and the lion. Cow and Bear. These are creatures that we can never imagine being together. Most Saskatchewan folks would dash outside with a hunting rifle if they saw a cougar in the pasture with their cattle. Isaiah takes the image of creature enemies even further when he talks about children and snakes. On the surface, we'd say yes, of course, a vulnerable child and poisonous snake is a frightening and deadly combination, but Isaiah is alluding to something even deeper here. In Genesis chapter 3, after Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, and God is laying out the dire consequences of this, we read in verses 14 and 15 of Genesis 3, "The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel." Snakes and humans have been mortal and metaphorically, spiritual enemies since the beginning. Satan, whom scripture calls the Father of Lies, the source of evil in the world is often portrayed as a snake or a serpent. So, when the Prophet Isaiah speaks of Jesus, this new King, he is promising readers that Jesus' presence will peel back the curse. Jesus is going to restore all things to the beginning, to the place of goodness and mutual relationship. Jesus, this new shoot out of the stump of Jesse, equips us with the power to overcome long held strife and conflict and instead to live outside of the boundaries of the Curse, both now and in the coming Kingdom.

As poetic and metaphysical as this prophecy of the Serpent and the Child being in relationship is, Paul, in our Roman's passage for this morning takes this idea and applies it into our very real, everyday life. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

In this passage, Paul is writing to a very young church about overcoming what was one of the greatest divides in the church at that time: Jews and Gentiles. When Paul writes, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." he's saying to the church, listen, that passage in Isaiah, that poetry that we love so much

isn't just some pie in the sky idea for a future time, the time is NOW. Those words are for our instruction. We're called to welcome, love and accept into our community those who are very different from us, those who we might consider enemies, those who grate on our nerves. Who was stepping in those rooms hungry to meet Jesus? A Roman soldier? A mentally ill woman? A man rumored to be an anti-semitic? Paul says to the church, you know what, they're welcome here too, because Christ says so, because Christ came for us all and we ALL need Jesus.

Jennifer Vija Pietz, in her commentary on this passage writes this, "The Scriptures, therefore, and the Christ they witness to, provide both the theological grounding and model for how the Roman (and all) Christians are to live united in a community that accepts its members' differing backgrounds and convictions (Romans 15:4–6).

Presenting Christ's own "welcome" as the standard for how Christians are to welcome one another sets the bar high—far above simply greeting one another as we take our seats in the sanctuary or the pastor issuing a general welcome to visitors from the pulpit without anyone taking time to speak with them after the service. Christ's acceptance of all people came at the cost of his own life. His service to God and people turned away from God meant laying down his own life (see also Romans 5:6–11). It is this gift of ultimate love that empowers Christians by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13) to also serve each other in ways that build up all members of the community, even when it is difficult or costly to oneself (for example, 15:1–3)."

As I mulled all these ideas over this week in my sermon writing, I was slowly filling with the uneasy emotion that is called conviction. If Jesus makes it possible for the lion to lay down with the lamb, the Jew and the Gentile to eat at the communion table together, who am I resistant to? Who am I judging? Who would I be anxious about, irritated by, if they were to walk into this sanctuary on Sunday morning? Where are the spaces in my life where I am only paying lip service to the Welcome of Christ?

It's a tricky question, one that people of faith have clearly struggled with since the beginning. There's that old saying that good fences make good neighbors, but Jesus was never one for borders. Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, says this, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

When Taylor and I did our premarital counseling, we were cautioned that when in conflict with one another, we should avoid speaking in absolutes. Using phrases like “You ALWAYS do this!” or “You NEVER do that!”, because humans are nuanced, always changing and evolving, nobody is always something or never something. There’s a danger in telling oneself a single story about another person or another group of people. I felt quite aware of this during Freedom Convoy, both sides painting the other with a single brush. One side out of touch with the needs and desires of real working class people. The other side is disrespectful, unconcerned with public health. In times of conflict or even just differing viewpoints or opinions, it can be easy to allow the myth of a single story to creep in. But Paul is getting at, through the words of the Prophet Isaiah, that the stories of hostility, of us versus them, of too different, or wouldn’t fit in are now brought under the Lordship of Christ, It’s a New Story, one that will all fit into. And the Title on the cover? Jesus Christ Is Our Peace; Jesus Christ is now our story. All our stories.

And as hopeful, beautiful and long awaited this sort of Peace is in our lives, relationships, churches and communities. When the rubber meets the road, it’s hard. It’s hard to find common ground, hard to submit ourselves to one another and the collective good of Gospel especially in a culture as individualistic as our own. Before we explore this a bit more, I need to make a word of caution: The mutual submission, kindness, peace, and collective care that we’re talking about this morning, do not apply to unhealthy or abusive contexts. Every church has it’s challenges, because every church

has real, wonderful, complicated human beings as part of them, and learning to live and love in unity is not the same as “putting up, and shutting up”, if I may be so crass. Nobody is obligated to stay somewhere where they are abused or silenced. And I realize that sometimes these scenarios can be hard to discern, that these situations are complicated, and the right or wrong thing to do isn’t always clear. And to people who may find themselves in those spaces all I can say is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is love, and I’m sorry when that isn’t true.

Now, returning to living peacefully together, with that important caveat noted. Ed recently read a book called Whole Hearted Faith, which was in this month’s library bundle. The book was mostly written by Rachel Held Evans, and her manuscript was finished by Jeff Chu, after her passing. Ed told me this quote from the book, which I think captures life in the church well. “To be a part of the church, you need to have a thick skin and a tender heart.” A thick skin and tender heart. Those are wise words.

I’ll tell you a story about a church that I saw live out this kind of difference well. Our church back in Manitoba was a bit of a hodgepodge of people, age diversity, theological diversity, political spectrum diversity, racial, educational, and socio economic diversity. Of course, this was diverse by southern Manitoba standards, so take the image with a grain of salt. But the church did well to not make an issue of the differences, but to make their mission the focus, namely, “We are a family who love and serve one another because that’s how to love Jesus.” And they did -care was their hallmark. Food for sick people. Yard care for widows. Childcare for weary parents. They loved and served each

other in really, tangible tender ways. Did they have conflicts? Absolutely. Was I filled with some small sense of dread when I'd see certain people coming to make conversation with me? Yes. But somehow, those things were able to be background noise, instead of life altering clatter because when I think about the people in that church, I remember the care. Years later, when I was here in Saskatchewan, it was the pastor couple of that church that pastored me through discerning my own call to ministry. Even though the church didn't have a female pastor, and probably would have some concerns about that in their own congregational context. From a distance, they prayed for, encouraged me and served as a sounding board for the very hard decision I made to not accept a pastoral position at Wildwood Mennonite Church. I will always be grateful for that. Some months after that time, I was in southern Manitoba and mentioned to a friend how grateful I was for their help, and was looking forward to visiting them that afternoon. She expressed some surprise at that, knowing that I and this couple held quite different views on a lot of things. But to me, that didn't matter, nor to them (seemingly) either. Because it was the mutual care that was most important, the mutual care in the name of Christ.

To close this morning, as it is my prayer for us to live in peace under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, I offer these words from St. Augustine, an early church father, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Amen.