***WHERE IS YOUR PEACE?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

December 4, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

 On the whole I am not fond of those signs posted in front of some churches that attempt to catch your eye with a clever saying, often in neon lights. Too many of them are trite, push the limits of propriety, or are borderline blasphemous like the one here in town that read: “Jesus, the first blood donor.” But every now and then there is a message that makes me stop and think for a moment because it says something powerfully true in just a few words. A few years ago I took note of such a sign outside a church in New Wilmington, PA where my dad lives; the sign read:

***Peace begins not at a Mideast table, but at a Mideast stable****.*

While *table* and *stable* differ by only one letter there is a big difference between the two as it relates to peace. At the Mideast *table* sit powerful figures trying to negotiate a truce among hostile factions. Despite the efforts of all the folks who have been sitting around those negotiating tables all these years, there is still no peace in the Mideast – not in Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. Some of the negotiators can’t even agree on the shape of the table at which they should sit! Peace remains elusive and inconclusive at the table in that part of the world and at tables in most other parts of the world as well.

 The *stable* of which the sign speaks lacks the political clout of the powerful figures who gather at those Mideast negotiating tables. The stable offers simple shelter to a peasant couple, some barn animals, a handful of shepherds, and a newborn child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It is hardly the assembly one might expect to initiate peace of any kind beyond the peace and quiet of a silent night while the baby sleeps. Yet the bold affirmation of that New Wilmington church sign, the prophet Isaiah, and the Gospel writers is that the child born in a Mideast stable is indeed the one with whom peace begins, and for that reason he is called “the Prince of Peace”. What kind of peace begins with him? It is the kind of peace of which Isaiah speaks.

 Back in October a young Palestinian woman came to speak here on a Wednesday evening. She was sponsored by the Presbyterian Peacemaking program, and she lives and works for peace among Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East. She came to share her insights and experiences on the conflict there and the prospects for peace. In her presentation she made an impassioned statement against a two-state solution to resolve the conflict, illustrating with statistics, maps and experiences the daily injustices Palestinians have been experiencing. What struck me about her comments was that for her it was an all or nothing kind of resolution. Any peace had to include full justice for all the people; any continuing injustice or discrimination was an obstacle to any peace. Peace without full justice would be no peace at all!

 Her perspective on peace in that corner of the world came to mind as I read this passage from the 11th chapter of Isaiah about the shoot from the stump of Jesse and the peaceable kingdom. It came to mind, not because of the experiences she shared, but because of the integral relationship between justice and peace that she articulated. One writer has described this prophecy of Isaiah as “a hinged pair of paintings….Beneath each panel of the diptych is an inscription: the first reads *Justice*, the second says *Peace*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Justice and peace bookend this messianic prophecy of Isaiah; for the prophet, justice is a necessary precursor to peace.

 “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots,” proclaims Isaiah. Jesse was the father of King David, and a shoot from the stump of Jesse is thus a branch of Jesse’s family tree who stands in the royal line that begins with David and ends with the messiah. Like David before him this shoot is blessed with the spirit of the Lord. That spirit came upon David at his anointing by Samuel, guided him through his rise to power and kingship, enabling him to do what he could not do alone. It is a spirit of wisdom and understanding like that of King Solomon, a spirit of counsel and might evident in the life of King David, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord which mark the lives of all the spirit-filled servants of God.

 We are among those servants of God who have been blessed with that same Spirit who enables us to do what we cannot do alone. When John the Baptist dunked folks in the River Jordan it was a baptism of repentance; the water signified the washing away of sins. But as both John and the early church affirmed, baptism into Christ is more than just washing away sins of the past; it is entering a new life for the future – a life marked by faith, love, hope and humility as spirit-filled servants of the Lord. It is not just leaving something behind; it is embracing something new – that life to which Jesus calls us as disciples. In baptism we enter that life and receive the Spirit of the Lord. And then what do we do? Most of us spend the rest of our lives fighting that Spirit and resisting the Spirit’s work in us and through us. Why would we do that?

 We resist because the Spirit does not always call us to walk on easy paths. The Spirit urges us to go on the road less traveled where we may not want to go and to do what we may not want to do:

 love folks who are pretty unlovable,

 forgive those we would rather not forgive,

 risk our health to stand with the oppressed against the oppressors,

 share the wealth we think we have earned for ourselves,

 leave the comfort of our comfort zones to serve those in need or to fight injustice.

We resist because our culture encourages us to follow the crowd on a road to riches that rejects sacrifice and believes with Ben Franklin that God helps them who help themselves, even though those words are found nowhere in Scripture! We resist because it is the path of least resistance, the path that finds support from our consumer culture and our own selfish desires. We resist because it is perhaps sinfully human to resist, a genetic remnant of that fall from grace to which the story of the Garden of Eden bears witness.

 David resisted the Spirit in his dalliance with Bathsheba. Peter resisted in his triple denial of Jesus. Pretty much everyone resists the Spirit from time to time, except Jesus, and you might wonder whether even he resisted when he prayed that the cup of suffering might pass from him, before adding, “not my will, but your will be done.” You might think that God would give up on us and just take away the Spirit, but that is not God’s way. God perseveres with us and calls us to stop resisting and embrace the Spirit who will help us to be more faithful disciples, to be the people God wants us to be, calls us to be, yearns for us to be – the kind of people who might live in a peaceable kingdom.

 This week I received a Christmas card from the Carter Center in Atlanta. The cover for the card, designed by Yoko Ono, is two words printed in black block letters on a white background; the words are **IMAGINE PEACE**. Inside the card is a message from Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter:

*As our thoughts focus on family and our many blessings during this sacred time, we ask you to join us as we imagine a world at peace.*

What do you imagine peace is like – for you and for the world? Is it simply the absence of violence and war, or is it more? Is it more than a warm, comforting feeling? Isaiah imagines a peaceable kingdom in which all creatures, including the human creature, live in harmony with one another; a kingdom in which there is no violence or fear; a kingdom in which all things and all people know the Lord. The way to such a peace is marked by justice. “With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth,” says Isaiah. Before he offers that description of the peaceable kingdom in which the wolf lies down with the lamb and the lion and leopard frolic with the kid and the calf, Isaiah describes a reign of righteousness and justice that will protect the poor and powerless. The pursuit of justice precedes his vision of the promised peace. Only when that just kingdom is established does the peaceable kingdom arrive.

 We cannot bring about that peace ourselves. Christ alone, the shoot from the stump of Jesse, is the only one who can make it happen. But we can be instruments by which he makes it happen. We can begin to live into that glorious vision by pursuing justice and seeking righteousness now. Peace without justice might be an absence of violence or war, but it is not the kind of shalom to which Jesus calls us, the kind of peace that Isaiah foretold, the kind of peace that God promises us. As Martin Luther King, Jr expressed it, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” The roots of true peace are entwined with justice and righteousness; those who would be peacemakers must also be champions for a more just and righteous world. John the Baptist echoed that sentiment when he chastised the Sadducees and Pharisees, saying, “Bear fruit worthy of your repentance.” In other words, be forgiven people who are changed people, living into that righteous life to which God calls us, a righteous life that embraces justice and peace.

 Where then is your peace this Advent season? It is not at the negotiating table of the high and mighty. It is not in the sigh of relief when you finish all your Christmas shopping. It is not in the election of any leader or the promise of any politician. It is not in the rosy glow of your Christmas tree. True peace for all of us, begins in a Mideast stable where to us a child is born and a Son given, the one who is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace! Amen

1. Paul Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.27 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)