

Messiah rules in peace

Isaiah 11:1-9

This message is, to me, a clear indication of God at work in our process. I began working on it on Wednesday morning. At the time I had not heard of the shooting of a man in Louisiana. As I continued on Thursday, I also had not yet heard of the shooting of a driver in Minnesota. However, by Friday, when I was getting ready finish up, I had heard of both of them as well as the sniper shootings in Texas. If ever there was a week for us to meditate on peace and on the Prince of Peace, this is it.

The world is a more violent place because there are more people jammed more closely together. When parts rub together without being oiled, they cause friction. The oil that is needed is “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:14). I can give hope that God is present in our situation and He will have the last word. Otherwise, I say that until the world in general embraces the grace, love, and fellowship held out to us by God, there will continue to be animosity, suspicion, fear, and hatred. But let us look to

the Scriptures for the ultimate vision of God and ask how we can participate in it.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;

from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him--
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD--

and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears;

but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,

the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling
together;

and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

Infants will play near the hole of the cobra;
young children will put their hands into
the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all
my holy mountain,

for the earth will be filled with the
knowledge of the LORD

as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah
11:1-9)

The son of Jesse will bring righteousness and justice to the earth

David, the son of Jesse, was the hope of the Israelite nation. After centuries under the Judges the people were desperate for a king. We tend to look down on them for this choice, but just reading the book of Judges should be enough to help us see why they were so discontented.

The judges were inconsistent. A few of them,

like Gideon, and Deborah were godly. Some of them were a mixed bag, like Samson and Jephthah. I say this guardedly because if you read their stories, you'd probably think they were not good leaders. Many of them were just plain bad. All of them were put in place by God to deliver them from the consequences of their own sin, but not all of them handled the power well.

With Samuel, they had a good judge, but it looked to the people like the whole problem was starting again because his sons were not good. They had no idea where things were going from here. When they pushed, God gave them Saul, and though he started off well, things went sideways there too.

Some people believe that if the Israelites had just been patient, God would have given them Jesse's son David as their first king. Their short-sightedness left them wishing they did not have Saul. In the end, David had to clean up some messes that Saul's administration caused. But David was always the standard that all other kings were measured against. When everyone is at their best, David is the ideal king.

But then, he wasn't

Some of David's failures are well known, and others are not, but he was a far cry from being the ideal king. Of course, the people were not ideal subjects either.

You know the kind of situation we're addressing. When I was little, there were times my mom wished my brothers and I would all be on our best behavior. Usually there was a problem involved. Sometimes the problems were big, but usually they were just niggling little misbehaviors. Sometimes mom knew about them and sometimes she didn't. The truth even now is, while our family is pretty close, and while everyone in my family says they're Christians, and nobody is really at open odds with anyone else, we are far from perfect. Some of the problems are glaring and some of them are hidden from public view.

No matter how good a person is, they are always going to fall short.

That's why Jesus, the "son of David" is so important. He too is from the root of Jesse. Isaiah calls Jesse a "stump" and I'm sure that was a mystery to his first readers. The line of David was still unbroken at the time. However, within a few generations it would be broken and the line of kings would look as if it

had faded to nothing.

Then Jesus came along. One of the popular names given to him by the people was Son of David, because of his heritage. He was, of course, a very distant grandson of David and heir to the royal line. So, from the broken stump of Jesse, Jesus, this new shoot springs forth. In Jesus, the Son of God, is the potential to fulfill everything David, as a flawed human, could not. He tells Pilate when he is on trial His throne is not of this world. Therefore, his legacy as king is only beginning when we think of his life and accomplishments.

This is where belief is so important. Our faith is in Jesus not just as fully human, but as fully divine. He rose from the dead and is not finished with His work. If we don't believe that our whole way of life is meaningless. It is one of the things that brings Jewish thinkers up short. The messiah was supposed to bring in this ideal kingdom, and Jesus didn't do that. Our response is, "not yet."

His kingdom, will be and already is based upon the impressive list in Isaiah:

- righteousness
- wisdom
- understanding
- good council

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| • strength | LORD |
| • fairness to the poor | • faithfulness |
| • justice | • appropriate retribution for the wicked |
| • knowledge | |
| • the fear of the | |

We don't need to try to define the details of what all this means. Isaiah is not giving us a grocery list. He is trying to give us an overall picture. This is the kind of ruler the Messiah will be.

Jesus, as a poor carpenter, a wandering rabbi was not in a position to institute the massive reforms that would have been necessary to bring this about during his life. From the oppression of the pagan Roman government to the corruption of the Sanhedrin, the work was immense. The biggest problem, though, was not in the government, but in the hearts of people. It always is. Transformation cannot take place from the top down, it has to start with individuals and relationships and work up from there.

It's a lesson that is hard to learn. When we as Christians believe the best course of action is to see the ways of God legislated, we are

missing the very strategy that Jesus himself observed. Change people first, then the systems will take care of themselves. We like to think that if the system changes people will benefit. The truth, though, is that any time a system is repaired first, ill meaning people find a way around it and the problem itself remains. It has to start with correcting people's hearts and, as we see in this passage, each of us learning to live at peace with the other.

And that brings us to the Messiah's kingdom.

The earth will return to its peaceful beginnings

Something that we don't think about very much. Right after creation, people were vegetarians. Some people believe even the animals were vegetarians because of the wording of Genesis 1

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green

plant for food." And it was so. (Genesis 1:29-30)

I don't think this is any kind of definitive proof of animals being vegetarians, but it's one possible way of understanding the text that should not be dogmatically dismissed.

However, it's clear that people were vegetarian. Notice this adaptation of the covenant made with Noah after the flood:

The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands.

Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

(Genesis 9:2-3)

The image of people and dangerous animals living side by side in safety and harmony has long been known as the peaceable kingdom, the title of a painting by Edward Hicks. Look at the zoo all living in the same enclosure:

- wolf
- lamb
- leopard
- goat
- calf
- lion
- yearling
- cow

- bear
- lion
- ox
- cobra
- viper

All mingled with the children and babies playing with them, leading them, and carelessly encroaching on their territory. Snakes and lions get place of pride (so to speak) with double mention. The covenant of Noah says how animals will live in dread of humans, but this passage points out how the human dread of dangerous animals will be neutralized.

Some say this passage and others like it are proof that animals will be in heaven. I like to think so. They certainly lean in that direction. However, that is not the main point of the passage. The main point is that the things we naturally consider dangerous will no longer be threats. Natural enemies will live in peace alongside each other. Fear is abolished.

More than the idea of actual animals and people living in harmony, though, is the idea that peace will be pervasive. The more important truth is that people will live at peace with other people. In Isaiah's day, the idea was that Jerusalem would live at peace with Nineveh. These days it is that the U.S. would

live at peace with Afghanistan and North Korea. Imagine a world in which the threat of interaction with traditional enemies is completely defused. Imagine the strong being gentle and the weak being fearless.

We can see this as heaven. It's accurate to say that what is already true in heaven will someday also be true on earth. The day is coming when God will bring His rule into a literal and immediate presence among people.

Being citizens of the Messiah's kingdom

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, and we say "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" this is partially what we mean. We are asking God to bring about the peace of His presence to us here. We are asking for the coming of the Peaceable Kingdom.

Now think about this for a minute. We ask God for our daily bread

We then go to work and earn the money it takes to buy it.

This is not a contradiction. It is the mechanism God uses to provide for us. He gives us health, strength, and ability, then we

take those resources and exert them in the system He has decreed, that we would live by the sweat of our heads, that if we don't work we do not eat.

We also ask Him to forgive us, and in the next breath say we will also forgive others. This is the system He explains in the next part of the passage, that when we forgive, we are forgiven.

Somehow, we are under the impression, though, that the will of God in heaven to take root on earth, is all up to Him, and we have no part in it. That's not true. We pray for God's will. We discern it so we know it the best we can, and we participate in it. This is how we end up in various ministries to other people. Do you realize it is also how the peace of God takes root on earth? We look at the Peaceable Kingdom, we gain insight to know that the image of peace between wild animals and vulnerable children is reflective of how we must work to bring about peace in the name of Jesus here and now, between the vulnerable and the powerful, no matter which side of that equation we find ourselves. We know that it may never arrive in perfection in our own time, but we also know that God's will is that there be peace between us. He

makes that very clear in a number of Scripture passages. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to seek peace with others.

How do we participate now?

Avoid aggressive behavior and words

Gentleness and kindness are two fruit of the Spirit. Our society values independence and dominance. It is easy to fall into the belief that strength = aggression, or strength = arrogance. These ideas are traps. The truth is, we are interdependent. We all need others, and it is only a previously unhealthy mindset or one that becomes that way that believes otherwise. Cooperation is the best way for us to find our way through this life with our relationships intact. Trying always to “take the lead” or to get the advantage in all situations is a sure way to drive wedges between yourself and others.

Avoid polarizing language

The most efficient way we have of thinking is in categories. Thus we think of animals as carnivores or herbivores, diurnal or nocturnal, mammals or reptiles or birds. We do this with people too. We naturally think in terms of gender, size, appearance, and distinctive features like hair and eye color. The problem

is that we extend that kind of thinking to judgement. We use categories to define not just differences and similarities, but acceptance and non-acceptance. The biggest problem with, for example, the current struggles over Black Lives Matter, and the responsive Blue Lives Matter, is the polarization. People on either side make judgement calls about the other, assuming motivations, opinions, and philosophies that are way too generalized to have any hope of being true. We pick a side, make assumptions about the other side, dig in our heels and determine to stand our ground ... and this is the most important part ... against ... the other side. It is difficult, but true that each individual you encounter in your life is exactly that, an individual with his or her own story, life, values, and situation. No amount of polarization will make any other interpretation of an individual true.

Consider others better than yourself

This is Paul's way of saying, no person is of higher intrinsic value than any other. We are all loved by God. We are all His creation, in His image. However, it is our natural inclination to gravitate to our own perspective, to think that our own experience

is normal for everyone. Because of that bias, we will naturally be inclined to do what is best for ourselves, not necessarily thinking that it is not best for others. The only way to defuse that impulse is to maintain communication with other people. Remember that their perspective will not be like yours. The only way to understand it is to ask interested questions and to listen. It's more complicated than that, and it takes lots of practice, but that's the bottom line. Then, according to Paul, in order to overcome our own selfishness, we must prefer the other's perspective over our own.

But won't someone take advantage?

Probably, but that's not nearly as big a problem as the people of God in the Kingdom of God taking advantage of others. And when someone begins taking advantage, that problem can be dealt with, as it arises. There is no moral up side in entering an encounter with suspicion.

Give

Always be ready to give. Whether it is a few dollars, a coat, a blanket, a meal, or simply the benefit of the doubt, give. Give time. Give help. Give attention. Give appreciation. God

is a God who gives. He has given His good gifts, like rain and sunshine to everyone whether they like Him or not, whether they believe in Him or not, whether they have even ever heard of Him or not. Jesus says if we're going to be like our father, we have to give.

Think big and small

What about my lifestyle promotes the Peaceable Kingdom: my family practices, job, social activities, entertainment choices, the way I buy and use material things, my political choices. Am I setting myself up for failure? Peace is a huge goal. It cannot happen over night, and it needs constant tending on every level. Even with that it will not always succeed, because some people and the Devil himself want to undermine it.

Am I making friends and entering social contexts in which animosity, violence, or hate are the norm? Am I partaking of that context or am I being a healing agent in that context?

Does my family maintain long term grudges, suspicion, or avoidance toward other parts of the family or the community at large? When it falls to my part, am I promoting healing?

Does my job force me to take a polarizing stance toward others? For example, This is

true of military careers. It is generally not enough for a military force to be content with defense of the helpless. Especially in more recent years it often takes an aggressive stance toward others, usually feeding that stance with racism, prejudice, and bigotry. Any person embracing the peace of Christ should have a default preference to withdraw from professions that promote aggression.

Do I buy products that exploit others? Am I maintaining a strategic ignorance of where my stuff comes from and how the people who make and process it are treated? I don't pretend that we can completely extract ourselves from a large and complex economic system, but we can make many informed, moral choices about the companies we patronize. We can know to what degree we agree with their personnel policies.

We will not come to a place where we like everyone, but we are called to love everyone. That means we must control our behavior and our attitudes even when we cannot control the circumstances or our automatic, internal responses. We must promote and cooperate with the peace we expect God to bring about, being an instrument of His peace in His hands.