

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, Christ the light of the world and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

Welcome to the 2nd Sunday of Advent. The Sunday of Peace. That may seem like a bit of a stretch with the reality of our current affairs and the readings we have this morning. I can find peace in the readings from Isaiah, the psalm and Paul's letter to the Romans, but it gets much when we get to the fiery words of John Baptist in Matthew's Gospel. I can get there, but it takes a little more work. So, let's start with the Peaceful Kingdom in Isaiah—as the editors of the NRSV title this passage.

Did you hear the words “the wolf shall live with the lamb,” and think, wait, didn't we just hear that. Yes, you did, the last time I was with you. Well close anyway. Isa 65:25 says

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

As a reminder, Isaiah 11 is from the time of the Assyrian exile in the 6th century BCE and Isaiah 65 is from the time of the Babylonian exile in the 8th century BCE. Both have this amazing image of a peaceful creation where even animal enemies (that is predator and prey) live and eat in peace together. In the midst of a brutal captivity and slavery, the prophet of God speaks a defiant hope for peace and restoration. You may also remember that I spoke of Walter Brueggemann and Abraham Heschel, both of blessed memory, who refer to God's judgement as truth spoken for restoration. I have been ruminating on this the past few weeks and the more I think about it, the more I like it. You see, all the fire and

brimstone prophecies we have in the Hebrew Bible, the First Testament, are written by God's people who needed to make sense of the disaster that had befallen them. In ancient times, each nation had their own god and the nation who conquered another had a stronger god. This becomes a huge problem when Israel is conquered, again and again. Is the Lord God of Israel not the most high and powerful God? If he is, then how have they been defeated and taken away in slavery? The only way to reconcile that is to frame the defeat and slavery as punishment. But what if all—or at least many—of these passages where the “Thus says the Lord God, dot, dot, dot” are really God—through his prophets—just naming reality. I mean, they lived in a time of great violence and nations were constantly going to war with one another. It was a brutal time. And yet in the middle of this harsh reality, they dare to hope for a peaceful existence for all of God's creation. The last verse in our reading today reads “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” The Hebrew word for knowledge here is used in the First Testament for God's understanding. It is relational knowing—intimacy, recognition, alignment. When creation knows God in this way, peace becomes not an imposed order but the natural fruit of divine presence. That takes some robust holy imagination in the midst of conflict and slavery!

Psalm 72 describes the kind of King the psalmist is yearning for. One that brings justice for the poor and liberation for the oppressed. This justice will bring abundance and peace for the people and the earth. Peace, that is Shalom in Hebrew is not tranquility; it is wholeness, the stitching together of torn places. We have this reading in Advent, because this is the defiant hope we have as we wait for the Christ Child, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, God with us.

Paul's letter to the Romans speaks of this hope and peace. He reminds the early church that the Scriptures were written "for our instruction" (Rom 15:4) so that through endurance and encouragement we might have hope. Paul speaks in a turbulent and troubled time to a divided community—Jew and Gentile learning to share one table—and he frames unity not as compromise but as the overflow of God's mercy. He ends with the prayer that the "God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Abound! That's abundance, overflowing with hope; defiant hope in the face of reality. And how do we access that hope? Through the power of the Holy Spirit!

And that my friends brings us to the Gospel. But first, here's a little lectionary teaching. Did you notice that our gospel switched from Luke to Matthew the last couple of Sundays? Anglicans, among many other denominations use the Revised Common Lectionary. This is organized into a three-year cycle. Year A we read mostly from Matthew, Year B, from Mark, and Year C from Luke, with the Gospel of John scattered throughout all three. Those years follow the liturgical calendar which begins the First Sunday of Advent and ends on the Reign of Christ Sunday. We have now entered into Year A which focuses on Matthew. And Matthew has its own distinctiveness. It is commonly thought to be the most Jewish of the Gospels. In fact, it is composed in 5 distinct sections, just like the Pentateuch, the first five books in the First Testament.

Today's reading is all about the fiery prophet, John the Baptizer, who also has a defiant hope for and expectation of one who will come to bring justice. Here's where it will take a little work to get to peace, but we will, I promise you.

John's whole thing is repentance. In Greek, *metanoia*, a turning around. Here's the thing about that, it's not simply turning away from something to some other unnamed thing. John is calling God's people to turn back to God and the covenant between them. In the middle of the Roman occupation and oppression, John is, with defiant hope, calling Israel to prepare for the coming Messiah by turning back to God. He has some pretty harsh words for them too. It's interesting to see that in Luke's gospel it is the whole multitude who are called a brood of vipers, but Matthew reserves that insult for the Pharisees and Sadducees. You will see this as a recurring theme in Matthew's Gospel. This is not anti Jewish rhetoric, or a rejection of the Jewish leaders. He wants the leaders of his Jewish people to do better! He is calling them to account, holding their feet to the fire. He calls them to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matt 3:8) And he warns them that any tree not bearing good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Yikes! Matthew is very concerned about the final judgement and for good reason. His gospel is written sometime between 80 and 90 CE. That's 10 years after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and about 50 to 60 years after Jesus. Yes, if you just did the math in your head, you would realize that it is highly unlikely the disciple Matthew would have been alive to write this. In fact, the Gospel of Matthew is formally anonymous. Early Christians came to associate it with Matthew the tax collector, but most scholars today believe it was written by a trained Jewish follower of Jesus, who shaped the memories of Jesus' life and teaching for a community most likely in Syria wrestling with its place in God's story after the destruction of the Temple. Jews who had once more been exiled from their home. The writer who we will continue to refer to as Matthew for the sake of ease, warns his fellow Jews not to assume that just because they are descendants of Abraham

that they will escape judgement. I think they have realized this at this point. Once again, a prophet is naming reality. They have experienced the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem again! They are in exile. But Matthew doesn't stop there. He records John proclaiming that the one following after "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matt 3:11b–12) Again Yikes! Let's take a look at the first phrase, "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The one following after, Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. To baptise is to immerse, drench, overwhelm! John promises that Jesus will overwhelm us with the Holy Spirit. That sounds like good news to me, but then as you know, I am a huge fan of the Holy Spirit. This fire thing though is tricky. We may recall that the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples as a tongue of fire on the day of Pentecost and that may be what John is referring to here. But the next sentence also speaks of fire which burns up the chaff, so maybe it has multiple meanings, a favourite literary device of Jewish writers.

You may have heard me say before that this wheat and chaff thing is not an us and them judgement. We don't get to sit all comfortable and smug assuming that we are the wheat, and those others are the chaff. We are all made up of wheat and chaff. One of my students commented on this very thing this week. She comes from the heart of the US prairies and knows a thing or two about wheat. Apparently, the chaff is the bit that protects the head of wheat! Imagine that! It's not evil, it has simply outlived its purpose. We all develop patterns of behaviour, chaff if you will, to protect ourselves. Protective behaviours are the strategies we learn—often without even realizing it—to keep ourselves safe in moments of fear,

uncertainty, or emotional pain. Many of these patterns begin in childhood, when we are doing the very best we can with limited resources and developing brains. Others may form later in life in response to trauma, betrayal, loss, or chronic stress.

At their core, protective behaviours are adaptive. They once served a purpose: helping us survive an overwhelming situation, avoid conflict, stay invisible, stay in control, or prevent further hurt. They can take many forms—perfectionism, people-pleasing, withdrawal, anger, hyper-independence, numbing, constant vigilance, and so on. The difficulty is that these behaviours rarely evolve when our circumstances do. What once protected us can become limiting or even harmful, both to ourselves and to those around us. A child's coping mechanism does not always translate well into an adult's relationships. A survival pattern may block connection. A defensive stance may erode intimacy. A self-silencing habit may keep us from growth, truth, or joy. Recognizing protective behaviours is not about judgment; it is about understanding. When we name them with compassion, we begin to see the story they came from—and the freedom possible when we learn new ways of being. That doesn't mean the process isn't painful, it is. But it's worth it! So, please hear this verse differently now.

One is coming after me who will soak you in the Holy Spirit and set your hearts on fire for me. He will crack open the chaff that once protected your true self, but now causes pain and prevents deep connection and set you free. He will cast that chaff in the fire where it will burn up and not harm you or others again.

Can you imagine what that looks and feels like? Soaked in the Holy Spirit, in grace and love? Set free from fear which causes us hurt others? I think that would feel like peace, don't you? I think that would create peace between us too.

And this, beloved in Christ, is where all our readings finally meet: Isaiah's dream, the psalmist's longing, Paul's prayer, and John's fierce call. Each one insists that God is not finished with us. Peace is not the naïve denial of reality; peace is the courage to trust that God is already at work within reality, loosening what binds, burning away what no longer serves, and coaxing new life out of old stumps. And defiant hope is not unrealistic optimism. It looks straight at exile, violence, division, and fear—and dares to imagine God's future anyway. It looks honestly at the protective chaff in our own hearts and still believes that the Spirit can kindle something truer, freer, more whole. It is the hope that rises precisely because things are difficult, not because they aren't.

And so, as we step into another Advent week under the sign of peace, I invite you—gently, practically—to take one small action of metanoia. One turning. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you a single protective behaviour that has outlived its usefulness. Not to shame you, but to free you. Notice when it surfaces this week. Offer it to God. Let Christ loosen its grip. And then, with courage from the Holy Spirit choose one new act that reflects peace rather than fear—an honest conversation, a kindness, an apology, a letting-go, a reaching-out.

Because this is how peace grows. Not all at once, not through grand gestures, but through small, Spirit-led openings in ordinary hearts. This is how the wolf and the lamb begin to graze beside one another. This is how a divided community

learns to sing with one voice. This is how a people in exile reclaim joy. This is how we, together, abound in hope—defiant hope—in the face of reality.

May the One who drenches us in the Holy Spirit kindle in us a fire that burns up the chaff and fill us with a defiant hope and deep peace. Amen.