

“What Are You Waiting For?”
December 4, 2022

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

Every now and then, I'll pull up behind a car that has one of those bumper stickers that exhorts: “Visualize World Peace.” Try as I might, the light turns green and I've come up with nothing.

Our imagination is lacking. We see what is right in front of us—and that's about it. In fact, we all too often dismiss the imagination and the role it can play in giving us strength for living.

We turn to the imagination of the prophets and we are both astonished and helped.

We heard again this morning what Isaiah saw when he envisioned the days ahead and the new reality that God was bringing about:

The wolf shall live with the lamb.
the leopard shall lie down with the kid...
they will not hurt or destroy...
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

The ancient world that awaited God's new age suffered horrible violence, deep despair.

The modern world that awaits God's new age suffers horrible violence, deep despair.

The words of the prophet mix realism and hope—as they should be mixed—helping us to see what we can't imagine on our own: the wolf and the lamb are together in the new world that God is bringing about.

We wait for the realm of peace

We hear the call to prepare the way of the Lord

All with no guarantees.

Isaiah spoke at a time when there was absolutely no hope among the people that the kingdom of David would be restored. The line of Jesse was utterly destroyed. And yet the prophet announces the way of the living God: after destruction there will be a new beginning.

This hope speaks deeply to our spirits. When the prophet says: “A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots,” we find ourselves wanting to believe, daring to hope. Deep within the roots of your faith is a word of strength that calls to you in the darkness of illness, or grief, or financial uncertainty. Deep

within the roots of your faith is a word of courage that calls to you in the face of the danger and uncertainty and evil that have become all too familiar.

Yes, we still know violence and injustice. We still know that only foolish lambs will get near a wolf, only unfortunate calves are found next to lions.

And because we know these things, we can be people of hope.

The physicist and Anglican priest, the late John Polkinghorne, reminded us that: “Christian hope is open to the unexpected character of what lies ahead precisely because it is open to the faithfulness of a God who is always doing new things.”¹

The “unexpected character of what lies ahead” is readily apparent in the words from Isaiah that we heard this morning. Left to our own we would never imagine such a reality.

Hope is the deep-seated human sense that all will be well, not because it is human nature to make all things well but because that is God’s desire and God’s intent for us and for all creation.

Even in the face of so much that is wrong—including the horrible national and international news that we hear each day—hope rises in you and in me out of what has been called “an almost unconscious perception of the steadfast faithfulness of God.”

Even in the worst of times—*especially* in the worst of times—God is bringing about new possibility. This creative work can be long and difficult.

Hope waxes and wanes in each of us. But this is the good news: when we cannot hope, others are here to hope for us. And this is the glory of begin a part of a congregation such as this: your neighbor is here to do just that—to hope for you when you cannot, to hope for you when you are weary, to hope for you when the waiting has been too long, the disappointment to great.

We are invited to look for and wait for and prepare for God’s new world. To do this, we look at the places of deepest despair, we listen to the greatest cries of anguish—and just in such place and such cries, we are best able to discover the God made known to us in Jesus Christ, the creator God who comes to creation as one of us.

We are not asked to do the work of God—taming wild beasts, even taming the human animal. But we are called to do the very human work of waiting for the peace that is promised by the living God.

This waiting is the active work of preparation that is prayer.

This is prayer that gives: spending time, spending money, spending self so that the world might be a little less like we have made it and a little more like God imagines it.

This is prayer that makes our homes ready, that makes ourselves prepared to welcome someone long awaited or those who arrive unexpectedly with little warning.

This is prayer that looks more closely at this world God created and listens more carefully to the voices and sounds all around: finding yourself in the late afternoon, looking at the blazing orange sky, watching through leafless trees the battle of shadows and light--knowing, hoping, even in these days of early long shadows who the winner is.

Out of our ordinary routines, out of all that is special about this time—traditions, memories, even the deep loss that many feel—out of all that we *do*, we are speaking to the Holy One.

If our speaking is faithful, it will lead to acting.

If our speaking is faithful, it will inform our acting.

Let us, then, in the days ahead, once more tune our voices to sing of joy and faith.

Let us train our lives to show love and mercy.

Let us shape our world into a place of justice and peace.

Let us look again with wonder as God incarnate in Jesus recreates our lives and makes the world as it might be.

In the coming year, let us allow God to work among us in surprising and unexpected ways.

In the coming year, let us allow ourselves to be generous so that we might learn what it truly means to flourish.

In the coming year, let us allow God to transform what is weak within you and me into new strength.

This is to say, let us wait and let us prepare for Christmas. And even more, let us prepare the way of the Lord. We continue to act and to wait. We continue to imagine with the prophets—faithfully envisioning God's new world, imaginatively acting in *this world* as we announce good news to all people:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

¹ John Polkinghorne, *Living with Hope*, pg. 4.