

December 8, 2013 /Second Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

### Peace Begins with Us

Isaiah 11:1-10 *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

Romans 15:1-13 *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

It is always difficult to get a handle on the Advent/Christmas season, given the cultural distractions. In recent years, it seems worse. Some proclaim there is a “War on Christmas” because of things like people preferring to say “Happy Holiday” rather than “Merry Christmas”. Then there is the commercializing of the season, now beginning on Thanksgiving afternoon. Add to this the sentimentalizing of Christmas that reduces it to misty feelings and tinsel and manger scenes with Jesus as a cute little baby. With all the superficiality and trivializing, it takes some discipline and attentiveness to touch the real meaning and purpose of this season. The readings for this Second Sunday in Advent provide a strong antidote, and bring us back to something solid.

The prophet Isaiah, prior to Israel’s exile, saw the deterioration of society under religious and political leaders ruled by self-interest and the influence of the rich and powerful. He envisioned the leader God would raise to serve God’s reign of justice and peace—a messiah filled with a spirit of wisdom and insight, able to see deeply into situations and know what to do for the good of all. A leader serving the needs of the poor and all who suffer, and holding accountable those who cause their suffering. This leader would be blind to everything but God’s desire for the well being of all creation. Isaiah’s criteria for leadership is clear. The leader is a servant leader, a servant of God’s vision for life. It is not all up to the leaders. Isaiah was concerned also about the people who bought into the false leaders’ program. God’s reign needs people who are living and working for a just and peaceful way of life, who in their own lives embody wisdom, insight, compassion, concern for the poor and those who have no advocate, who strive for a peaceful, just, non-violent, and generous community and world. Servant leaders, a servant people. This is the message of Advent.

Then Isaiah moves from the human community to the rest of creation, painting a sublime picture of the “peaceable kingdom.” So-called natural enemies living peacefully together. Predators and prey sharing the same pastures. Little children leading wild beasts around. Infants playing unharmed over the holes of venomous snakes. Non-violent wolves. Vegetarian lions. Snakes tolerating kids romping on top of their homes. These poetic images are meant to kindle in us the vision of God’s peace extending throughout creation. This is the vision of how life truly is and how it is to be. The problem is not the rest of creation but the human creature. We can read the whole Bible according to this theme: How God works with us, the human family, to draw us back into harmony with the whole of the creation. When we are out of harmony with God and each other, not only do we suffer but all creation suffers. Listen to these words from later on in Isaiah:

*The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers;  
the heavens languish together with the earth.  
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant. [Isa. 24:4-5]*

This is precisely the situation we face today with the destruction of the creation due to our unwillingness to live harmoniously as part of the creation instead of exploiting it. When we are engaged in restoring our lives to harmony with God and with one another, paying particular attention to those most in need, then the whole creation can begin to heal. How's that for an Advent/Christmas message?

Next, in wanders John the Baptist, straight out of the woods, messing up the nice Christmas season we were planning. He's a rough character, single-mindedly devoted to serving God and calling people to change their lives in the dawning of God's realm. Historically, Advent is a season of repentance, a season for fasting and penitence. Advent has nothing to do with the things the “War on Christmas” folks get upset about. It has nothing to do with the commercialized and sentimentalized holiday Christmas has been made into. In the wisdom of the church through the centuries, on this Sunday of Advent, we not only get Isaiah's message about justice and peace, but also John the Baptist is sent in to shake everything up, to take us to a deeper, more important level.

Advent is a season for repentance, literally, getting a new mind, going in a different direction, or simply waking up to who we really are in our relationship with God, and to what

God is really about with regard to this world and our own lives. It is about self-examination and looking at ways we can harmonize our lives more with regard to God and the rest of creation, in light of Isaiah's vision of a peaceful and just world. It is not about defending doctrines and beliefs, or even promoting a religion. It is about living in ways that bear good fruit, that express God's loving, peaceful, and just reign over all of life.

How do we do this? Where do we begin? We begin with our life as a community of Jesus, who embodies Isaiah's vision and who took up John's call to repentance but added to it the power, the spirit, the fire to ignite in us our true life. The peaceable realm of God's kingdom begins with each of us and with our life together as a community of faith. That is what Jesus has created in the church, not a religious institution concerned with its own status and perpetuation, but a servant community of human beings who, by their life together, seek to relieve the suffering of God's world.

Paul's words to the Christian community in Rome give us some clarity on how to do this. There were issues in that community and in all the new Christian communities that Paul knew, had founded, or had visited. They were the basic issues of human beings living peacefully and justly together. And Paul believed that dealing with those issues in the love of God embodied in Christ was the most important work of the church. In my nearly forty years of pastoral work, I have found that the same issues are part of every community's life, including ours here. How do we get along? How do we deal with our differences in commitment, ideas, lifestyles, and the like? We will always have them. And the issues are the same whether in the wider world of those who differ from us politically, religiously, ideologically, or in values, or those with whom we worship and work in the missions we are engaged in. It involves the tendency we have to turn anyone who differs from us into an enemy. We become so attached to our ideas, our ways of seeing things, that anyone who expresses something different from that touches some deep insecurity in us and we lash out in violence of thought, word, or action.

The problem with Christianity is not the Christian message but Christians themselves. Christian faith is not believable for so many in our society and world because Christians and Christian communities themselves manifest little of the truth they want others to accept. When Christians and leaders claiming to be Christian speak and act in ways that designate others as enemies, build themselves into coalitions seeking power over others, and make war

on others, physically, spiritually, morally, then the suffering of creation is increased, not relieved.

What is Paul's counsel? *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* This word "welcome" is very profound as Paul uses it. It means loving others as we ourselves have been loved by God. It means that the divine love that has fully embraced us, with all of our weaknesses and failures and confusions, is to flow through us toward each person. One of the disciplines in "Our Covenant One with Another," the commitment made by Covenant Members in this community, states that we "will endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness." It is the most challenging of the disciplines. It is easy to believe ourselves to be loving, welcoming people, showing forgiveness and acceptance to all. But the reality is that as soon as someone expresses a different opinion about something or seems to us somehow inferior in understanding or faith, our impatience, judgmentalism, and anger flare up. We have made them into an enemy, an object, not a person like ourselves. And we set ourselves over against them, wanting to change them, to make them into the image of what we think they ought to be.

Welcoming one another in the way Paul means it is the same kind of servant spirit Isaiah spoke of in relation to the king, the leader. It doesn't mean that we abandon our convictions, callings, or views. But it does mean that we make room in our hearts for others as they are, not as we want them to be. This calls for a kind of selflessness. Not the kind that tries to wipe out our own uniqueness and identity, but the kind that sees ourselves as part of a wider world, the whole of creation, including the person right in front of us who we don't understand and are having a hard time with. Instead of trying to figure out how to make that person different, to bring them over to our side, or just wishing they would go away, we set ourselves to the work in our own hearts of how to truly welcome, how to love this other person. We deal first of all not with that person but with the walls, the thorns, the weapons in our own minds and hearts, those things that make us defensive and hostile, controlling and power-seeking. This is the work of our inward journey, and when we are all engaged in it, we become a community in which lives the "peaceable kingdom" of life the way God created it to be.