

“Come to the Water”
Isaiah 11:1-10
First Presbyterian Church--Birmingham, AL
December 8, 2013
Rev. Lydia Casey
Baptism of Margaret Elizabeth Casey

The scripture this morning from Isaiah is one of the most iconic and well-recognized passages from the Bible. We see references to it over and over in popular culture and in the many artistic renderings of the Peaceable Kingdom, most notably seen in the imagery of peace found in the paintings of 19th century painter Edward Hicks. Growing up, my parents had several of these Edward Hicks prints of the Peaceable Kingdom on the walls of their house, and from a very young age, his vision of peace in those paintings was a comfort to me as I grew in hope of the kind of world that was possible in the auspices of God’s love. And, in fact, we even have the lion and the lamb lying down together on the walls of the Christian Ed. wing upstairs.

These images of peace and comfort found in the Peaceable Kingdom *are* key elements of the passage that we heard today. But we can’t ignore the fact that, when we move so quickly to the warm and fuzzy picture of the lion and the lamb, we lose out on the way in which Isaiah envisions us getting to that point. For Isaiah, this isn’t simply a time of happiness and warmth that will magically come together when the righteous king comes to rule, but Isaiah’s is an idea of the change that is, at its very foundation, radical to its core as it calls for an alteration of the social order that we, who are privileged, have found comfortable. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann states in his commentary on the Book of Isaiah, “Peaceableness in the created order requires, first, the enactment in the human community of a conciliation that is fundamentally economic.”¹ What a difficult message this is for us to hear, particularly coming from an American culture that lifts up capitalism as a highest value.

Some of you may be familiar with the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, with the movie *Catching Fire* (the second in the series) out in theaters right now. In this series, Collins (who was a graduate of the Alabama School of Fine Arts, by the way) creates a dystopian future society in which the wealthy, elite citizens of the Capitol live lives of luxury and excess, while they exploit and oppress the citizens of the poverty-stricken outlying districts to support and entertain them. In the most egregious act of totalitarian control, the leaders of the Capitol pit children against other children from each of the impoverished districts in a televised battle to the death for the amusement and power assurance of the upper echelons, using the twisted catchphrase of “May the odds be ever in your favor” to assuage the masses.

In the course of the series, the protagonist, a woman named Katniss Everdeen, becomes a symbol for the poorest citizens to rise up against the Capitol’s oppressive rule. While the story weaves in and out of Katniss’s love triangle with Peeta and Gale, as she tries to overthrow the Capitol, in an article titled “The Hunger Games Are Real: Teenage Fans Remind the World What Katniss is Really Fighting For,” author Christopher Zumske Finke states that ultimately, “*The Hunger Games* really centers on economic inequality, poverty, the abuse of wealth and power, and the

¹ ¹ Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 1-39*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. p. 102.

exploitation of the poor.”² At the end of the day, Susanne Collins is writing a dystopian future that is an offshoot of the present. An offshoot of *our* present, to be exact.

And yet the poem in Isaiah gives a different possible future from the one that *The Hunger Games* paints, although of the two futures, Isaiah’s seems farther away from possibility than the cynical one that Susanne Collins has created. In Isaiah, the powers that seek to oppress and control are overthrown by a new and righteous king, so that the poor and the meek might be given justice and equity in society. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “The primary function of the coming king is *judicial* (vv. 3b-5). It is the work of the king as judge to sort out conflicting interests and claims, to settle social disputes, to make it possible for every subject to be assured of security and well-being.”³ In other words, the role of the coming king provided an equalizing force for all people, particularly for those who were most vulnerable to oppression and ill-treatment at the hands of those with both the motivation and the means to profit from their exploitation.

Brueggemann goes on to write, “This ‘theory of government’ is not primarily concerned to create free space for ‘the working of the market’ in the hands of the powerful or for the policing of personal morality, but for the maintenance of economic viability for all members of society. It is clear that this ‘spirit’ is in the business of making systemic reparations for the poor and the marginalized[...] The rightly governed world will indeed be detoxified, no more a threat to the poor, the meek, the children, the lamb, the kid. The new world will indeed be safe for the vulnerable.”⁴

As Brueggemann so clearly points out in his commentary, peace cannot exist outside the bounds of justice for those who are marginalized, poor, and oppressed, not only in individual cases, but on a societal level as well. In order for peace to exist in the whole of nature to create the idyllic picture of pastoral harmony found in paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, we humans must first establish the bounds of peace within ourselves that allows all people to thrive without thought to merit or deservedness. And that kind of justice and peace transforms not only those who have been without it, but also transforms the whole of society and the relationships that comprise it. The late Nelson Mandela knew that, in order to live as one, we must work together as one to seek peace. In his reflections on working toward peace, freedom, and liberation for both the oppressed and the oppressor, as he walked out of prison he proclaimed to the world, “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”⁵

And lifting up all people up to receive freedom and justice without thought to who deserves it, that is the hallmark of grace that we celebrate when we participate in the Sacrament of Baptism. As I’m sure you all know, this is a special morning for my family and me. This morning we will baptize my daughter Mallie into this fine community of faith, and I am honored and humbled to be able to preach for this important moment in our child’s life. And I think having a baptism this

² Christopher Zumske Finke. “The Hunger Games Are Real: Teenage Fans Remind the World What Katniss Is Really Fighting For.” Tuesday, November 26, 2013. Yes! Magazine. <<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/20276-the-hunger-games-are-real-teenage-fans-remind-the-world-what-katniss-is-really-fighting-for>>

³ Brueggemann, 100.

⁴ Breuggemann, 101. 103.

⁵ Nelson Mandela, <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/Mandela/essay.html>, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2013/12/06/nelson-mandela-vision-leadership-all-too-rare/cK2QhNxjZSX9tVYEHq7mSJ/story.html>

morning is especially appropriate as it coincides with such a prophetic text as the one we heard today from the Book of Isaiah. After all, when we baptize her (or anyone, young or old!), we are showing forth a tiny glimpse of the peace and justice that Isaiah wrote about.

When we baptize someone together with water and oil at this font, we are acting out the promise that God's kingdom is open to all. We act out the promise that we are welcomed and equal in God's family, with no thought to who deserves it, or who has done the right kind or amount of work, or who has been born into the "right" biological family to be invited into a place of privilege. In this place, we are acting out the promise and hope prophesied in Isaiah, that God in Christ, the righteous king, has extended an offer of freedom and belonging, of justice and peace, of grace without bounds or deserving to include us all into his kingdom.

There is a song written by Fr. John Foley called "Come to the Water" that talks about the kind of community that is created when we open the doors for the kind of equality that we find in baptism and, as Rev. Ed Ramage said, when we welcome those whom God welcomes. Cathy has been kind enough to help me out with this on the piano:

"And let all the poor, let them come to the water.
Bring the ones who are laden, bring them all to the Lord:
 bring the children without might.
 Easy the load and light:
 come to the Lord."⁶

The prophetic vision of the future that Isaiah paints for us this Advent as we wait for a little child to lead us forward is one that we echo in the Sacrament of Baptism. That vision states that baptism and community under the righteous king isn't about who *we* are. It's about who *God* is. And that means that all kinds of people are welcomed to the waters of baptism, regardless of shape or size or age or walk of life. When we baptize the people who God calls into community as family, we may look like a ragtag group, but we also look like the Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God for such a family. Amen.

⁶ John B. Foley, S.J. "Come to the Water." New Dawn Music, admin. OCP Publications: 1983.