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Second Sunday of Advent

Sermons
from The Church of the Covenant

“The Long Pause”

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Isaiah 11:1–10

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. 9 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. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.
A woman watching a kindergarten Christmas pageant was moved to tears as the children belted out a song with words from Isaiah: “You be the lion strong and wild, I’ll be the lamb, meek and mild; we’ll live together happily, ‘cause that’s how it ought to be.”

“As I watched that throng of kindergartners singing,” she wrote later, “something immensely powerful washed over me; it was like a monsoon of hope and sadness, all these children so certain the world ought to be this way, and me so certain of all the ways it isn’t. It moved me to tears — Advent tears — for that long pause between what is and what should be, what is and what we Jesus-followers believe will be.”

Peace is something for which we long — peace in our families, communities, nations, world. The Quaker preacher and artist Edward Hicks was so captivated by the vision of peace described here in Isaiah that he painted more than one hundred versions of it. He put all the animals together: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and kid, the calf and the lion, and a child among them. All of the animals have wide-open eyes that look almost human. They also look somewhat startled, as if this change in their reality from relationships of predator and prey to mutuality and respect has surprised them as much as anyone.

This vision of peace is no more surprising than the prophecy that begins this passage -- Isaiah proclaims that from a devastated wasteland, new life will grow: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” Just before this passage, Isaiah describes a scene of devastation. God has taken an ax and cut down all the powers of the day which are depicted as towering trees. Nothing is left of Israel or its enemies except a mass of decaying stumps.

And yet, from one of those stumps, Isaiah sees something: a tiny, fragile green shoot, a sign of new life. This tiny sign of life represents a new ruler, one rooted in the lineage of Jesse, the father of David, Israel’s greatest king. Out of all the suffering and devastation God’s people have known, Isaiah declares there will be a new day and a new king, one greater than the people have ever known.

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1 Danielle Shroyer, online http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yeara/advent2ot/.
This new ruler will do what God’s people have failed to do: he will look out for the least and the lost. This ruler will not judge as we judge -- by the way people look or the way people talk -- instead he will see those who are suffering and he will be their protector, bringing them into the family of God.

It’s a wonderful vision. But can such a thing really be possible?

I love plants, well, actually, I should say, I love the idea of plants. There is something meaningful, I think, about having living things in your environment. The problem is, I have a bad habit of killing plants. Too much water, too little; too much fertilizer, too much light, not enough — I’ve killed plants in all kinds of ways. Last year, a plant in my office took a turn for the worse. I decided I must not have watered it enough. So I gave it some increased attention, which apparently hastened its demise. Then, because it was out of my line of sight, I forgot about it. Until one day, a member of the congregation arrived at my office with a plant that looked familiar and yet entirely different. “I was in here a few weeks ago and I saw this dead plant,” he said. “So I took it home and revived it.” If he was not such a trustworthy person, I would not have believed him. That plant was dead — completely and totally dead — but he coaxed new shoots from the soil and gave it new life. To me, it was miraculous.

Plants aren’t the only things that defy our expectations. People have a way of doing that too. A colleague of mine works in New York City, and, in a city of strangers, she got to know a man who lived on her street. They often saw each other in the mornings at the newsstand. Then, after forty-two years of marriage, his wife died, and she saw him transform. He walked more slowly, head bowed, shoulders stooped. He was, she said, completely cut off from everything and everyone around him. She continued to say “good morning,” when she saw him, but got used to getting no response.

Then, before she could get a word out when she saw him, he tipped his hat and said, “Good morning, Reverend. Going for your paper?” He walked beside her, eager to talk. She could not identify what had changed for him. The transformation seemed sudden, but she recognized that for him, the move from devastation to new life, had probably felt painfully slow. Still, to her, it was miraculous.²

² Barbara Lundblad in her commentary on Working Preacher:
The picture Isaiah paints of a land devastated,
   a people completely cut off,
   deeply resonated with those who first heard it.
They had been conquered and lived in exile.
   They were devastated, utterly despairing.
   They could not imagine a better future, certainly not a future
   in which they could coexist peacefully with their enemies.

Have you been there?
   Do you know how it feels to be certain that nothing will change,
   that nothing new will happen,
   that there is no solution to the problem,
   no light that can penetrate your particular darkness?

It is into just such despair that Isaiah offers these miraculous images:
   a fragile green shoot of new growth, where there has only been death and decay,
   peace and harmony in the animal kingdom, among the worst of enemies,
   a new kind of ruler filled with
       God’s spirit of wisdom and understanding.

In his book Peace, Walter Brueggemann expresses skepticism about Isaiah’s imagery:
   “Unheard of and unimaginable!” he writes,
   “All these images of unity sound to me so abnormal
   they are not worth reflecting on.
But then I look again and notice something else.
   [Isaiah] means to say that in the new age, these are the normal things.
And the effect...is to expose the real abnormalities of life,
   which we have taken for granted.
   We have lived with things abnormal so long
   that we have gotten used to them and we think they are normal.”

There is no better example this week when we’ve experienced the worst mass
   shooting since Sandy Hook, than the scourge of gun violence in our country. Over the last three weeks, while politicians have argued against welcoming refugees, two thousand people have been killed by guns, more than ninety each day — and not

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one of those people were killed by a refugee. This is has become *normal* for us and yet what could be more *abnormal*?4

Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Our knowledge tells us that the peace and harmony

Isaiah describes in this text is impossible — abnormal, even.

But in this season of Advent --

current pause during which we wait

for the promises of God to be revealed again --

God calls us to let go of what we think we know and imagine *a whole new normal.*

I recently saw the movie *The Martian,* and it wasn’t the science fiction action adventure I expected. It’s a movie that has stayed with me, not just because of the startlingly moving images of Mars or of the views of Earth from space, but because of how the characters — astronauts, engineers, astrophysicists — doggedly persist in imagining the unimaginable.

How can a single human being grow food on an inhospitable planet?

How can a rover designed to travel just a few hundred meters at a time make a trip of a few thousand kilometers?

How can a group of NASA employees run experiments and calculations for a stranded astronaut on Mars and then communicate to that astronaut one hundred and forty-one million miles away — on a planet with no smartphones or internet?

The movie offers answers to all of these questions, but it’s not the answers themselves that have captured my imagination.

It’s the way the astronauts and engineers and astrophysicists approached the problem — they do it with determination and perseverance and the sheer will to find an answer — which also suggests they are confident an answer exists and will be found.

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4 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/opinion/sunday/hysteria-about-refugees-but-blindness-on-guns.html?_r=0
Theologian Stanley Hauer was argues that if we really want to change ourselves or the world, acquiring the right image is far more important than diligently exercising our willpower.5

Isaiah offers us an image so incredible that it defies reason and belief. But it is exactly this kind of image that compels us and equips us to make the world, to make this city, this church, and our lives look more like what God has in mind.

In today’s reading from Romans, Paul also gives us another an image that defies reason and belief, a vision as improbable as Isaiah’s. It is another vision of a new normal, a vision of a community unified by one thing: the conviction that in Jesus Christ, God has done a new thing that changes everything. In Jesus Christ, God has shown us that the most important part of our identity is that we are children of God and followers of Jesus. This does not erase our differences and our diversity, but that core identity is what unites us. It enables us, as Paul puts it, “to live in harmony together so that we may with one voice glorify God.”

We all know just how hard it is to maintain that vision, that image of our true identity in Christ and how it brings us together and keeps us together. It is far easier to focus on what drives us apart, on how we are different and on the things over which we disagree. This is especially true in a time like the one we are in, when our church, our city, our country, and our world is in the midst of so much change. It’s hard to remember that what brings us together is so much more powerful — and important — than what separates us.

Paul suggests that the best way to find unity in Christ is to “Welcome one another...just as Christ has welcomed you...”

It may sound like Paul is asking us to do the impossible —

to receive each other as we are,
not because of how we conform to the norms we have established,
not because we are willing to follow the same agenda,
but because the example Jesus set is to
welcome everyone,
including those whose views and beliefs,
are radically different.

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Jesus calls us to invite in the very people who look the most different and feel the most threatening. It is for us, the equivalent of a flock of lambs inviting a lion right into the middle of the paddock. This requires that we make our shared identity in Christ more important than any innate enmity.

This kind of radical welcome has been a challenge for every Christian community since the very beginning, when Jesus’ disciples huddled behind locked doors after the crucifixion, terrified of the outsiders who might try to get in. But Paul reminds us that Jesus’ coming into the world broke God’s promises wide open so that they include everyone, the Jew, the Gentile, the poor, the rich, the wise, the fool, the lion, the lamb, the righteous, the sinner, you, me, everyone.

Impossible! Unheard of and unimaginable! we might say, along with Walter Brueggemann.
But, in this long pause that is Advent, may we begin to entertain the possibility that the unbelievable promises of God are true — that a world where violence reigns will one day know peace, that people of different points of view and persuasions can live and worship together in harmony; that light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

Amen.