Title: The Call of Peace

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

Date: First Sunday of Advent, 2015

 Good morning! You are looking good today, ready to take on the world. I’m glad to be with you as we stand on the threshold of Christmas.

 Let’s begin with a prayer: I love you, Lord…

 In your worship folder you will find a page of message notes. You may use them to follow what I say. You may also choose to fill in the blanks. I’ll give you some answers on the screen. Or, you may choose to disregard them entirely. Some have said they are helpful. Others have not said anything. Your call.

 Take your Bibles in hand this morning and turn to the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, chapter 2. Or watch the screen and it will come up. Or open your iPad and click on your Bible reader app. Isaiah is in the middle of the Bible, following Psalms and Proverbs, then Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon, and then Isaiah. Isaiah, chapter 2.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a four-week anticipation of the birth of Jesus. It is the run-up to Christmas. For these four Sundays, we’ll anticipate the birth of Jesus, hear the angel messengers speak down through the ages, talk about those who predicted Christ’s coming, and finally on Christmas Eve, celebrate the event.

As we mature in our faith and grow closer to God, we move from the small details and search for the overarching, deeper, more profound meaning of what it is to submit ourselves to God, to Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. This year, I want to ask you where you are headed. Where will your pilgrimage take you? And so it is particularly appropriate to read Isaiah’s account of what the world will become.

Scholars have determined that there are three different sections of the Book of Isaiah, each written for a different purpose to a different audience and each with a different hand. This passage from Chapter 2 comes from what has become known as First Isaiah. First Isaiah witnesses to the power and greatness of God. Let’s begin at Chapter 2, verse 1…

*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

*O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!*

 *—Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)*

 Isaiah had a vision. In his vision, Isaiah sees people of all nations streaming to the mountain of God. He hears them say, “Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord that God may teach us and that we might walk the path God shows us.” For God will govern the nations and arbitrate their disputes and reconcile them to one another. And under this leadership and example, the people will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and they will study war no more. There will be peace. Peace.

 This Advent season, we’re going to spend some time with the messages God has sent us. Angels are God’s messengers. It seems that when God wants to get our attention, God sends an angel. And the angel is not just an observer, but a messenger. The angels nearly always have a good word, always a message from God. And the angels and their messages are not limited to the Old Testament.

 In Matthew 1:20, an angel messenger comes to Joseph and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, that she will bear a child from the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and he will save his people from their sins.

 Matthew 2:13, an angel messenger came to Joseph and told him to take his family to Egypt to escape Herod.

 Matthew 2:19, an angel messenger comes to Joseph and tells him that Herod has died and to take his family back to Israel.

 Matthew 28:5, an angel messenger meets the women outside the tomb and tells them Jesus has been raised and they are to go meet Jesus in Galilee.

 The same is true in the Gospel of Luke, angel messengers appear throughout the Gospel, but I want to call your attention to a particular passage beginning in Luke 2:9…

 *“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* ***10*** *But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see— I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:* ***11*** *to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* ***12*** *This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”* ***13*** *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,* ***14*** *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

 Peace. The message is peace. Even as Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples, he gives them this gift, John 14:27…

 *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

 There will be peace. Peace. But peace is not just the absence of violence. It goes far beyond that. The tentative pause in hostilities in Palestine is not yet peace. The gradually lower body counts in Afghanistan are not peace. The lack of outright combat in Iran is not yet peace. We can see that. It will be years before real peace takes place there, a peace in which neighbor can love neighbor, become neighborly, act neighborly— probably generations.

We look at our government. There is no physical violence done there, but it is clear that there is no peace. Republicans lash out at Democrats and Democrats lash out at Republicans, liberals lash out at conservatives and conservatives respond to liberals, lies and half-truths are told, rumors are spread, accusations are made. We become wrapped up in “make’em pay” and “take’em out,” depending on our might to make peace. Nothing is ever resolved because it is to our advantage to keep the pot stirred. There is no real desire for peace amid talks of larger military budgets and more “boots on the ground.” The desire is to nurture and feed the fear and the anger. So there will be no peace.

The church is not immune to that. Even in church there are those who hurt and divide to promote their own personal agendas. There are always those who want it their way, no matter what others want, those who want to control, even if their control drives others away. We see it in our schools, our businesses, our friends.

 Peace is not just the absence of violence. We only have true peace when there is justice and freedom for every man, woman, and child. Isaiah saw that God must be the governor, **for only through God can we find true justice**. And we must be free to walk God’s paths, choosing to go willingly and lovingly.

Isaiah speaks of nations of peoples. And let me suggest that if we are to have peace, we must begin to think of ourselves outside of our cities and our counties and our states. All life is interrelated. See, we are caught in a web of interdependence in which we all exist together. What I do today will affect what you do today and what you do today will affect what someone else does, and what they do will affect what others do.

I love those TV commercials that ran for awhile where a man is walking down the street and passes a mother pushing a baby carriage. He looks down and sees a stuffed animal on the sidewalk and realizes it belongs to the baby. He picks it up and runs back to the mother and gives it to her. And a woman who is passing by sees his good deed and as she is standing at a street corner, a pizza delivery guy beside her steps off the curb and she pulls him back before he gets brushed by a passing car, and a fellow in a pickup see her do this, and chooses to let someone merge into traffic in front of him. And you get the picture. Kindness inspires kindness. And in the last scene, someone does something nice for the man who picked up the baby’s toy on the sidewalk.

We are connected. Church is a group of people who has decided to accept that our destinies are intertwined with each other. We affect each other in profound ways.

But it goes way beyond church. We are able to affect one another all over the world. As the tentacles of the Internet reach out, we find ourselves connected electronically. You can sit at your computer in Springboro, Ohio, and talk to someone sitting in a living room in The Netherlands and it doesn’t cost a nickel. I know because I just did that just a few weeks ago with a photographer friend in Amsterdam. A jet plane can take off from Dayton and land in Riyad in a matter of hours. Satellites look down on us from space and see so well that they can read our license plates. News from France is on CNN as it happens and we sit in our living rooms and watch. ISIS terrorists murder, rape and commit genocide in Syria and we watch and hear it unfold.

Why, you can’t even get up and go to work in the morning without being touched by the world! When you step into the shower, you reach for the sponge, and that’s handed to you by a Pacific Islander. You take the bar of soap, and that’s given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. A Taiwanese helps you on with your shirt, giving thanks to the weaver in Bangladesh who made the cloth. Your shoes are slipped on your feet by a Korean cobbler, your wrist watch by a Japanese. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your cup of coffee, and that’s poured for you by a Guatemalan. Or maybe you prefer tea, and that’s poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you like cocoa, and that’s poured by a West African. And then you reach for a piece of toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. The jam you spread on it is at the hands of a Canadian, flavored by fruits and spices from the Indies. And before you finish eating breakfast, you’ve depended on more than half the world. Until we begin to see ourselves as neighbors, until we recognize we are dependent on each other, we aren’t going to have peace on earth.

 We also aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize the sacredness of all human life. Every single person is sacred because every single person is a holy child of God, created in God’s image, invested with God-given life. And life is sacred and must be respected as such. Until we see this, we will go on fighting wars and killing each other. And this is not just at a national level, where we can sit back and fold our hands and say that we are not responsible for national politics. When will we embrace peace personally and begin to seek peace in our personal relationships? We go on brutalizing each other with angry words and hurtful rumors and innuendoes and lies. We go for cheap slogans and soundbites, all with the purpose of criticizing someone’s character or politics or faith or color or ethnic homeland.

Isaiah reminds us that in spite of our individual differences, our political differences, our ideological differences, our philosophical differences, our theological differences, our racial differences, our linguistic differences— in spite of all those differences— we are brothers and sisters in Christ and we must be willing to sit down at the same table of brotherhood. In Christ there is no east or west, no Jew or Gentile, nor slave nor free. And when we truly believe in the sacredness of human life and person, we will stop exploiting and stop abusing. We will have peace.

 Peace was a focal point for Jesus. He taught us that it was hardly significant to get along with friends, since even a rascal can do that. But Jesus said we must love ***our enemies*** and pray for them. Love ***our enemies***! This is as radical today as it was then. Jesus said we must not work to undermine others, we must not spread rumors and half-truths, we must not actively seek the destruction or hurt of even our enemies, but we must love them and pray for the love of God to flow through their souls and the peace of God to transform their hearts. In Jesus’ day, the zealots who were plotting the overthrow of Rome did not welcome this kind of talk… nor did the religious folks who felt that any involvement with the enemy was impure or improper.

 But Jesus calls us to sit down with our enemies ***while we are still enemies***, with no pre-conditions, and share the table. Only then can real peace come to us.

 But we say, “We have to fight! If we don’t fight, our culture, our way of life, could be destroyed. We could be conquered. Our lives would change.”

And Jesus says, “Yes. Your way of life will be changed. You will rely on me, rely on God, instead of your possessions. Your faith will grow, your humility will grow. You will experience real pain and discover the real value of life. Yes, your life will be changed! Won’t it be grand!”

 And we say, “No, Lord, please, no. I don’t want to live that way, defeated and in pain, without the security and safety of the walls of my home and my guns and my survival knowledge. I won’t give up the stuff that really gives me security: our armies, our money, our power and might. We will kill anyone and any nation who gets in the way of freedom for everyone, as long as it is a freedom that looks like ours.”

 And Jesus says, “The place to begin is with a face-to-face meeting. Sit down with those whom you have labeled as enemies. Sit down with them and talk. Share the table. Because only then can you have real peace.”

 See, it is at the very point that we are **SURE** we can’t get along with each other, **that we are forced to allow God to intercede for us and with us**. We are forced to allow God to assume control, to give up our private goals, our hidden agendas, our hatred, and our fear.

In a very real way, peace is not our doing at all. It is God’s doing. Peace is when we step back and allow God to lead us into relationships that we are sure will never work. Unless God guides the process, we can never have real peace. And we have to remember that real peace will not look like a pause in hostilities. It won’t look like tramplings at Wal-Mart and shootings in restaurants and schools and movie theaters and on traffic stops. It won’t look like war and lynchings and Ku Klux Klan and White Supremists and overcrowded jails and custody hearings and hate radio and smear campaigns and gang wars and drug overdoses. When we allow ourselves to stop relying on our own power and rest in God’s power, only then do we have a shot at real peace.

 **Swords and spears don’t melt into plowshares and pruning hooks. They are beaten.** Peace does not just occur. It happens only when we champion it, pray for it, long for it, work for it— when we trust God for it.

Advent may just be a time of miracles— or at least a time for us to commit ourselves to making miracles happen. We bring ourselves to the table and we sit with our enemies. And we allow God to teach us the way and place us on the path. We must believe, as Martin Luther King said, that the arc of the universe bends toward justice. That God will triumph.

As we stand on the threshold of Advent, and we look toward Christmas, we must not look at it without seeing Easter, for the two are inseparable events. Christ comes to show us the way along the path. And even though humankind loves darkness far more than light, even though we crucified Jesus on a cross on Good Friday in the dark, Easter morning the sun rose. Easter is an eternal reminder that the earth will rise again, that we shall stream toward God’s mountain, that God will teach us the way and place us on the path. God will be our ruler and shall reconcile us to each other; we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. And we will study war no more.

 Advent is a journey. This year, we must ask ourselves where we are headed. Where will our pilgrimage take us?

 There is an old fable about a sparrow and a dove.

 “Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” the sparrow asked of the dove.

 “Nothing more than nothing,” the dove replied.

 “In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story,” the sparrow said. “I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow—not heavily, not in a raging blizzard—no, just like in a dream, without a sound, and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. They numbered exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch, nothing more than nothing, as you say, the branch broke off.”

 Having said that, the sparrow flew away.

 The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for awhile, and finally said to herself, “Perhaps only one person’s voice is lacking for peace to come to the world.”

 **Will you add your voice to those crying out for real peace?** Where will your pilgrimage take you this Advent season? Toward the highest mountain, the beautiful mountain where we join with our brothers and sisters in peace? Toward laying down the swords of anger and hatred that inflict wounds and keep us at arms length from one another? Will we take real steps to sit at the table with our brothers and sisters— both those whom we love and those whom we hate— and allow God to lead us in relationship with each other? Will this Advent journey change us? Will we allow ourselves to be changed? Will we allow ourselves to journey toward real peace?

 Pray with me…