

# Yearning for Peace

sermon digest

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Isaiah 11:1-9

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A year ago this week we gathered for worship just two days removed from the devastating news that a deranged gunman had entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and killed twenty children and six teachers and school administrators. I remember well the sense of incongruity of going forward with an Advent service focused upon joy when everything within us was screaming for answers in the face of such tragic human loss. As we approach the one year anniversary of that event this week, we find ourselves asking, "Have we done enough to feel assured that such a tragedy will not unfold again?" Have we done enough to make our children safe?

We should be clear. None of us is at ease with the level of violence that afflicts our society. Every one of us deeply desires and prays for its end. Every day as we sit down with our newspapers, we encounter seemingly endless reports of young and old alike being killed and maimed by the violence eating at our society. Every evening as we sit down to the nightly news, we are horrified at images flashing across our TV screens—scenes of ongoing tragedy and suffering in Syria, Darfur the Republic of Congo; updates on struggling talks for peace in the Middle East; increasing evidence of rising terrorist attacks in Afghanistan; and footage of the devastating impact of the latest storm or earthquake. We are sickened by what we see and hear and the obvious toll it is taking on human life.

Or are we? Undoubtedly we care and are moved, but are we not in danger of being so overwhelmed by the bad news that we have successfully resorted to shielding ourselves from it? Sure, the tragedy of specific instances and images occasionally get through to us and move us; but encountering such scenes of suffering again and again, are we not in danger of becoming so numbed by them, so anesthetized that psychologically we turn them off and determine to focus our energies in those areas where we are more confident that we really can make a difference? In all honesty, do we actually hold onto hope that things can change and more, that efforts on our part can facilitate any meaningful change?

Is that the way it is with us? Is the Advent time of preparation we observe and our Christmas celebration merely a convenient source of diversion? Is it just a brief sojourn into the magic of wishful thinking? Or is there something deep within scripture, within faith that pulls us up short and opens us again to the mystery of God's love? Is there something here that reinterprets our lives and our world and sets us about the task of turning the hope and peace, joy and love that we encounter here into realities in the world where we live?

**Advent calls us to see the world as it is.** God's coming into our midst always involves God's encounter with things as they are. More than just the story of happiness and light, it is the story, too, of the darkness of this world encountered by that light. Advent does not turn a blind eye to the darkness that surrounds us. Advent looks the darkness squarely in the eye and proclaims a light that the darkness, trying with all its might, cannot extinguish.

Scripture contains no more rapturous words of hope and peace than those uttered in the book of Isaiah, and yet Isaiah at every point speaks not just to hopeful expectation but to the darkness that presses in on every side. First Isaiah's exquisite images of peace in this morning's passage are painted over against a situation of tragic failure and loss on the part of his people Israel. Isaiah, like other prophets of the eighth century alternates between burning words of judgment and anticipation of hope and deliverance. He chastises the nation and its rulers for their pious contempt for God exemplified in the mistreatment of their most vulnerable neighbors:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (10:1-2)

Assyria, Isaiah assures his fellow citizens, is the rod of God's anger. The nation will be reduced to burned out rubble.

Confronted, however, with the hubris of Assyria and recognizing a faithful remnant yet in Israel, God does, however, change courses, leveling and burning the great forest of Assyria. And then in the midst of what seemed total devastation a small, tender shoot emerges from the stump that once was Israel. From the stump of Jesse, the father of David, a new branch grows. Admittedly, it is a long way from the majestic cedars of Lebanon to which Israel once aspired, but it is a fragile, new beginning nurtured by

the spirit of God. Self-serving greed and pride that once dominated Israel's political scene are displaced with righteousness and equity toward the poor and meek, and Isaiah breaks into a lyrical celebration of newness that is "as broad and large," Walter Brueggemann observes, "as all of creation" [*Texts for Preaching-A*, 12]. The most ancient of enemies—the wolf-lamb, leopard-kid, calf-lion, cow-bear, lion-ox—are made friends. Three times Isaiah makes reference to the child, signifying the new birth of innocence in the midst of a new reality in which the blowing of God's spirit has emanated in a reordered world where the fragile and vulnerable can live out their lives in safety and peace.

**Advent calls us to trust the new wind of God's spirit.** Advent calls us to trust the new wind of God's spirit instead of the hopeless stumps that have failed in the past. Summarizing the radical new day emerging in Israel's midst, Isaiah exults, "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" (11:9). Notice the abundance celebrated here: No hand-to-mouth existence, but a fullness, a wideness equal to the abundance of waters filling the ocean. Dare we to anticipate then, that there is indeed enough hope out there? Enough to raise us out of our despairing resignation to the way things are? Enough to energize us for the tasks at hand?

A couple of generations later, Second Isaiah will cry out for a highway in the desert—a cry taken up in the Gospels by John the Baptist. Advent, you see, is about rapturous joy and expectation as the light of God breaks in upon us, even as it shines God's light on the suffering world into which it breaks. Advent, you might say, is a paradox. It is, in Gail O'Day's words, about "the coming triumph of God manifest precisely in the darkness of this present evil age." Advent and Christmas are about unspeakable joy, and they are also about unbearable suffering and injustice. They are about a world of peace, but they are also about the tragic realities of war and human tragedy. Advent and Christmas are about the world in which we live being confronted with new hope, new expectation for the future. To hide ourselves from the sad realities of our world or to dismiss hope for the transformation of those realities is to miss the full truth of what happens when God enters our world. Advent reminds us that we are not held slaves to things as they are. Advent points us toward a future that is not closed, that is not bound to being nothing more than a repetition of the past. Advent, in other words, points us toward a future that is open to the fresh and continuous infusion of grace.

The Advent season also rekindles our expectancy and hope for God's presence among us. We do not hope simply for the romantic, lyrical birth of a baby in a manger, but we hope for God's decisive entry into the world. Advent announces that yet again our lives can begin anew, that once more we have the chance to welcome the arrival of God. Each Advent we are reminded that the future is always open, that God's promises are ever new, that God's coming to us is ever imminent ["The Praise of New Beginnings," *Journal for Preachers*, 1990].

The peace of Advent occurs in the middle of and in spite of the difficulties and suffering of our lives and our world. The peace of Advent is not blind to the circumstances that beset our lives and world, but neither is it finally limited by those circumstances. The peace of Advent summons us to new beginnings. It summons us to work our lifelong to bring hope and comfort in the midst of the world's pain.

Proclaimed throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures, the peace, the *shalom* of God, is more than just the absence of warfare or tension. It is about fullness, wholeness and completion. It is the product of justice and righteousness. It is gift, and it is task. The peace of Christ issues forth in mission, a mission as wide and inclusive as the love of God. May God grant us the hope and the courage to live out our days in its service.