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First Christian Church
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Live Peaceably

Isaiah 11:1-10 The Message A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump, from his roots a budding Branch. The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him, the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding, the Spirit that gives direction and builds strength, the Spirit that instills knowledge and Awe-of-God. Awe-of-God will be all his joy and delight. He won't judge by appearances, won't decide on the basis of hearsay. He'll judge the needy by what is right, render decisions on earth's poor with justice. His words will bring everyone to awed attention. A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked. Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots, and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land. The wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. Calf and lion will eat from the same trough, and a little child will tend them. Cow and bear will graze the same pasture, their calves and cubs grow up together, and the lion eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens, the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain. The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide. On that day, Jesse's Root will be raised high, posted as a rallying banner for the peoples. The nations will all come to him. His headquarters will be glorious.

Peace. *Peace*. The second Sunday of Advent is traditionally called "Peace Sunday." And the traditional reading for the day are these opening lines from the eleventh chapter of the prophet Isaiah, the one whose words are guiding our sermon series this season. I've selected Eugene Petersen's Message translation for its freshness. We've likely all heard the more traditional translation many times and it may have lost its power to startle and even shock us. The comedian Woody Allen once captured some of that startling character when he said "Well, the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep." Indeed, Isaiah's vision presents a topsy-turvy world: for cows and bears don't eat from the same trough and they don't even eat the same things. And it's just a really bad idea in real life for a

toddler – or grownup, for that matter – to stick a hand into a snake’s den. We know that that a “mere breath” seldom topples the wicked in this world. If you told your child go out and play with a lion, someone would hopefully call Child Protective Services.

This scripture, then, as lovely as it is in the traditional translation and as fresh as it is in Petersen’s, seems, well, absurd on the face of it. And to label such seemingly absurd images as being the touchstone for Peace Sunday implies, if we’re honest, that the vision of peace that is promised with the coming Christ is also absurd, a soothing soporific, perhaps; an anesthetic anodyne that lets us have, in the words of that old Eagles’ song, “a peaceful, easy feeling.” But therein, my friends, lies our mistake. We often do think that “peace” is a matter of a certain kind of feeling; “I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul.” But it’s not.

For peace, like love, is not first of all a feeling but a choice, a decision. There is not one word in Isaiah’s vision about how the one who is to come from that “stump of Jesse” will feel. And if there were, I suspect he’d feel really bad. For consider what was happening at the time Isaiah offered his vision: the northern kingdom of Israel was gone, its capital destroyed, the ten tribes that had populated it dispersed. We don’t realize it now, but Assyria in its day was huge and powerful and conquered nations in its path with seeming ease. And now those in Judah, the southern kingdom, were nervous and fearful and worried that Assyria would soon turn on them. But Judah’s kings were oblivious and even evil. Instead, they preyed upon the poor, they encouraged the harassment of “outsiders,” they rewarded their friends and punished their enemies instead of truly seeking to protect the people in the face of threats both from within and without. In the words of one commentator, the nation was “facing an ever-encroaching

Assyrian colossus... [and Isaiah was] plainly fed up with the pathetic attempts at leadership he witnessed from the king and his court in Jerusalem. He dreamed of something far better, and imagined that YHWH had that better in mind.”¹

And so he offers his vision of what true peace will look, and not a word of that vision has to do with feelings, but with decisions and actions that witness to the possibility and the hope that living peaceably was indeed not a pipe dream. They are words and actions which Christians have identified as foretelling what the reign of Christ will be like, the kind of king he will be and the kind of people he will call us to be. What decisions and what actions, then, ought you and I make and do if we are to more nearly be grasped by that vision? Let me simply suggest two things:

First, let us decide that we will no longer believe that the peace of God, the peace of Christ **means you'll always be happy**. That way leads to dispiritedness and disillusion. A writer by the name of Stephen Mattson puts the point this way: *“There’s an unhealthy expectation... that we’re always supposed to be joyful, as if being anything other than a smiling, peaceful, and jolly spiritual cheerleader is...”*² not to be a Christian. But we know that isn’t so: From the pre-Christmas squabbles – has your family had one yet? – about whether the lights should be white or colored, whether the stocking gifts are to be wrapped or unwrapped, whether Christmas dinner will require turkey or ham, and on and on, to the much more disquieting wonderings about whether this peace business is even possible in a world so hurting and broken. **So let me say this:**

¹<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Wolves-Lambs-Leopards-John-Holbert-12-03-2013>

²Stephen Mattson, “Seven Lies About Christianity -- Which Christians Believe,” <http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/12/03/seven-lies-about-christianity-which-christians-believe>

the peace that the coming of Christ brings to those who are Christian is NOT about always being happy. In fact, Christ's peace – as opposed to Hallmark's or Disney's peace – is one that will at times make you profoundly unhappy with what is and profoundly wanting to help God work for the not-yet. Christ's true peace will also make the most confident of us think twice and thrice about what we are certain we know and whom we judge. For you see, Jesus hopes that none of us will be "happy" in the face of poverty and pain, or children killing children, or one billion people in this world who do not have clean water, or the hundreds of incidents of abuse or attack on Muslim Americans in the last month, or the folks whom we know who are so desperately feeling a hole in their hearts from an empty seat around the Christmas table. No, the "peace that passes understanding," as the Apostle Paul puts it, is something that indeed moves us from understanding to action. And **that** is where true peace lies: in knowing that your life is offering hope and healing to someone else.

Second, let us decide that we will not give into that myth, so prevalent in our culture at this time of year, that the peace of God, the peace of Christ means that all your problems all disappear. Mr. Mattson once again has helpful words to say about this. The peace of Christ, he says,

...isn't about ignoring reality but embracing it, engaging the real world and all the baggage that comes with it. ...[F]ollowing Jesus causes us to accept — and confront — the facts, whether they are good or bad.... [F]aith in Christ requires honesty and bravery, and it demands sacrifice, service, and heartbreak.³

³Ibid.

Seeking to live peaceably doesn't mean all your problems go away; but it does mean that the circle of your care widens, the bounds of your empathy are enlarged, and that the hurt of others becomes not just their problem but your problem too.

There is so much more we could say this morning about the peace that Isaiah foretells, the peace that Christ promises, the peaceableness that can characterize our lives when we decide that we shall act in harmony with that vision. But that is enough for a morning on which our choir has also given us a beautiful expression of the meaning of Christ's coming. So let me close in this way:

The world is not yet at peace. Each life in this room will continue to have hurts. Each one of us will sometimes be tempted to say to God, in the face of that announcement of lions and lambs, of swords and plowshares, "*Yeah, right.*" But my friends, on this morning, know this, know this: the story of Advent, the words that the prophet proclaims, are a reminder of the already and the not-yet. God has already said how things will end, and God has already offered us the opportunity to live peaceably even now in a way that embodies that end. In the midst of too many lies from the culture that would try to distract us, both the prophet Isaiah and the coming Christ calls us to do our very best to know and live as citizens of God's peaceable kingdom, the peace of the One whom all the earth will know – and indeed, as Isaiah says, it will be glorious! May Isaiah's vision of peace inspire your imaginations, may the peace of Christ inhabit your hearts, and may the peace of God guide your actions on this and every day. Amen.