

Dec. 6, 2015
Isaiah 11:1-10
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

A Shoot of Hope

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

In today's reading we will hear a word of hope from the prophet Isaiah, who did not live in the best of times. In fact, by the time of Isaiah, the nation of Israel, which had come into its own and flourished under King David, is disintegrating. The nation had split in two and eventually they are both felled by the Assyrians. The great cedar of David's dynasty is reduced to a stump.

Today's passage begins with the image of that stump -the stump of Jesse, David's father. All that David had accomplished is gone and Isaiah wonders, "Who will be the new shepherd boy to bring hope to the people?"

As we will hear, Isaiah imagines this new leader as a shoot, a fresh sprig of green coming from the stump. Over the centuries this passage has spoken powerfully to followers of Jesus in its image of a little child who will lead us in the ways of Spirit, justice, and peace.

SERMON

As the days continue to shorten, we spend more and more time in the shadows of night. We need Christmas!

As the consumer merchandising complex ramps up in these weeks, we spend more and more time in the shadow of despair. We need Christmas!

As the daily news draws us into the world's violence, we spend more and more time in the shadow of fear. We need Christmas!

* * *

At a committee meeting the other night one of you reminded us that from the big picture perspective the world is statistically getting less violent. That is good news. He went on to acknowledge however, that when you look at or experience it up close violence drives you crazy. With today's instant media it has the capacity to drive us crazy constantly!

The world's violence is deeply distressing. Our concern, first and foremost, is for those who have been injured by others. We do indeed hold them in our prayers. However, as Jim Wallace of the Sojourners community wrote the other day, "Pray, then act."

Here are some of the questions I find myself wrestling with this

Advent/Christmas season:

How is it that we have chosen to value cheap goods made overseas more than our neighbors' needs for decent, living wage jobs?

How is it that we incarcerate so many for so long for non-violent crimes, and then those who commit violent crimes yet violate their parole are still on the street?

How is it that we believe that guns are such a civic right that we continue to sell assault weapons to civilians?

If you find yourself asking these or similar questions you might want to join the new Social Justice Conversation Group that will be meeting in January. As Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

One of the crucial things for any such group is hope. So, let's turn for a few moments to the prophet Isaiah. He, too, lived in a time of economic, interpersonal, and international violence. Yet, he offers a poetic vision of hope that has inspired people of faith for over 2,500 years.

Isaiah imagines the one to come as one who will

- be infused with God's Spirit
- act for justice
- embody peace

At the heart of this passage is the Hebrew word *ruah*, which means spirit/breath, all at the same time. The

shoot of hope that Isaiah imagines will be infused with God's Spirit. The *ruah* of God will fill the person with wisdom and understanding. That same *ruah* will then breath through the lips of the person calling the people to justice. Then and only then will the peaceable kingdom be experienced. In other words, you can't get to peace without going through justice. So, when you get Christmas cards with images of the "Peaceable Kingdom" know that there is a cry for justice behind that picture.

Isaiah's vision begins with the image of a new shoot - a young plant giving new hope from what appeared to be a dead stump. At the end of his vision, there is another new shoot - only this time in human form - "a little child shall lead them."

A little child is a powerfully evocative image, proclaiming LIFE, with capital letters. A little child can make our hearts leap to life when we are feeling hopeless.

As 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart put it:

*If I were alone in a desert
and feeling afraid,
I would want a child to be with me
for then my fear would disappear
and I would be made strong.*

*This is what life itself can do
because it is so noble, so full of
pleasure, and so powerful.*

(Imaging the Word, V 3, pg. 91)

For those of us who celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, this image of a child has deep resonance. It is our Christmas hope.

Today, at the manger, with the children of our congregation, we have gathered sheep and shepherds - ordinary creatures and ordinary people - waiting with hope. The promise of the Christ Child is for them, for all people, for all creation. It is a promise that God enacts in the midst of a very messy world.

Madeleine L'Engle put it this way:

First Coming

*God did not wait until the world was ready
till...nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were
unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep
and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came,
and God's Light would not go out.*

*God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*