

# Growing in Peace

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME*

Sunday, December 4, 2016

**Scripture: [Isaiah 11:1-10](#)**

## Sermon

### Peaceable Kingdoms

I am pretty sure, no matter how scientific you are, how much you understand about meteorology and atmosphere, or human psychology or neurology you have had this experience maybe once in your life...

You walk outside, on a day that doesn't seem to be any different than any other... it has the same challenges waiting for you as there were yesterday

...you walk outside and the world seems, somehow, better. The wind blows at your back and the sky seems higher, and—maybe if, or even especially if—the world seemed unmanageable yesterday there is a sense that you are headed in the right direction and the wild wide world is open and free and possible.

I say all this just to point out that there is something in us that perceives moments of almost supernatural connection and joy and peace in our connection to creation. Maybe this is thinking too small, but that's the experience I connect with what Isaiah writes large for us in this prophecy today. There are days where we feel ourselves just slightly more in tune with the world around us: in harmony maybe.

In a time of great tumult, Isaiah shares an image of the coming of God's realm of peace not as a journey to another world, but as one in which this world is brought into that harmony.

We are reminded today, in the quiet and the dark of the advent season that the world rests and sleeps, and then comes alive again... year after year. And faithful people tell again the stories of prophets who spoke in times when so many said life would not come again... and yet it did. We remember again today that God's promise is still alive and moving that life will come in all its fullness and no one shall take our joy from us then.

We are reminded today that communion is formation. That here at this table we are at the heart of God's vision for us as humans when we are feeding and being fed. Forgiving and being forgiven. That all the wolves of our lives can actually be called to quiet rest with all the lambs. And, just to be clear...

Sometimes, though it feels like we are still learning so much about how we live in the midst of this creation... it is good to be reminded that for thousands of years the image of God's spirit dwelling among us has been one of creation (and you best believe we are part of creation) at peace with itself. And, prophetically, it can call us to pay attention to those places where there is dis-harmony in creation... and with each other.

We are, as we do every so often, being reminded of our relationship to creation by our friends of the Standing Rock Sioux. They are reminding us by standing, along with hundreds of others of indigenous tribes, in the way of what our nation keeps telling itself it needs, more ways to transport the oil from the Bakken Oil Fields in North Dakota. The Standing Rock Sioux have resisted the route of the proposed pipeline, saying it will run through sacred sites, and most troublingly, close to and even under their water supply. They and the other protesters who have

This is just a bit of history repeating of course, last century: when flooding hit Omaha, Nebraska, the Army Corps of engineers created the Oahe Dam in South Dakota for flood control and hydro-electric power and submerged 200,000 acres of

The century before, was, of course, the some 50 years of conflict between the U.S. and the Sioux nations. See, General Custer, see Wounded Knee Massacre.

This could just be another story of how far out of tune we have gotten, with each other in human life and with the world around us... But this weekend, as the tribal nations face up against another deadline to remove themselves from the federal lands that they are currently occupying, they're being joined by some guests. Some 2000 veterans of the U.S. military are joining with them. The veterans are bringing no weapons with them, they are simply coming to stand in front of the protesters as they again come face to face with what has proven to be a highly militarized police force.

One note on equality and the peaceable kingdom that Isaiah talks about that bears remembering. When the wolf lies down with the lamb, that may be a peaceful image of equality... but we should remember that it wasn't an equal amount of effort. Let me say this another way: who has to give more up for the wolf to lie down with the lamb? THE WOLF. Just a reminder that equal effort is not guaranteed in the journey towards equilibrium, and that those of us who carry a long history of wolfishness may have more work to do.

So that's the vision. How do we get there?  
Isaiah has a curve ball for us there.

## **What Grows in Us**

As it turns out, I am kind of a lousy gardener.

I am bad at figuring out where things will grow, and maybe luckily, I am equally bad at figuring out where things will NOT grow.

I have, many times in my life, been sure that I am not a place for a change to grow. Maybe you've been there, too.

God, it turns out is a great gardener, and manages to make a lot of good stuff out of...well... let's just say our... mulch, shall we?

*A shoot shall come out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out from his roots...*, Isaiah says.

To be clear, what Isaiah is saying here is that God's salvation for the exiled people of Israel is coming from the very house of Jesse that got them into this mess. That when this new Messiah comes, it will not be in spite of the foibles and weaknesses of Israel's history and leaders... it will be through those very things. God with us, in love not with power, but with human-ness, created-ness, creation... leading us not with a mighty king, but with a child.

Maybe, in the midst of all our divisions right now... in the midst of the conflicts of our desires and our industries with our hopes and our creation is this... know our history. Really, know it... so that we may be open to how God may be turning that history into new life.

We can be, as a country, a bit on the amnesiac side. The greatest sins of our communal life are often covered up by a worthy love of country... but a love that doesn't know us in our fullness can't be a Godly love. It's not the kind of love that could see the house of Jesse knocked down... but a shoot growing from its roots. We wait expectantly for Christ who knows us and shows us who we truly are and loves us through it all... to hope.

I'm not under any illusion that every veteran who is on their way to Standing Rock knows the full history of the Sioux Wars...Knows the history of U.S. Military force being used to dispossess them of their home. But some do. Some can wrestle with the full history, honestly, openly, and can be a part of telling a new chapter. <sup>[1]</sup>

That is the Advent challenge to us in Isaiah's telling of new life is to know our history, be unafraid to face our failings, and to make space in them for transformation and creation of God's justice and God's peace.

Prompted by a guide and friend, I have been reading a lot of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote from a time of little hope, speaking of our responsibility to nurture hope. He said this:

*I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose [God] needs [people] who make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us resist in all time of distress. But God never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on him alone. A faith such as this should allay all our fears for the future. I believe*

*that even our mistakes and our shortcomings are turned to good account, and that it is no harder for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is no timeless fate, but that God waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions.*<sup>[2]</sup>

A few weeks ago, in the midst of stand-off with police, a young man stood, explaining to a reporter the importance of the land, the feelings of loss, the frustration at facing its misuse... when suddenly a herd of bison came charging over the hillside... the people erupted into shouts...

Even in the bleak mid-winter... heaven and nature sing.

May it be so. Amen.

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1. A few hours after this sermon, the Army Corps of Engineers [announced that it would deny the easement for the proposed and disputed path for the pipeline.](#) ↩
  2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* p. 11 ↩