



First United Church of Christ
300 Union Street
Northfield, MN 55057
507-645-7532
church@firstucc.org

A Promise
Isaiah 11: 1-10
December 8, 2013

Today's passage from Isaiah tells us that peace, a transformed world, depends on two things: Knowing God and caring for the poor. I'm going to talk about both of these today. Preparing for the birth of Christ is preparing to grow closer to God and to be invited even more deeply into a particular way of life. This path to peace is about our own hearts and about the whole earth.

Isaiah 11: 1-10 promises a just ruler. This ruler will know God and **therefore**, this ruler will act with justice. Because this ruler knows God, this ruler will then do what is right for the poor and decide with equity for the meek. **Only then** will there be a transformed world, peaceful for human beings. The picture of the Peaceable Kingdom that Isaiah paints is not as much about animals getting along as it is about human security. Lions and bears are becoming vegetarians so that flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, or human livelihood will be safe. Snakes aren't biting so that children are safe. The hope expressed is of a safe world for human beings. We get to that safe world for human beings, Isaiah says, with the help of a leader who knows God and knowing God then has a concern for the most vulnerable, for the poor.

The church looks at this passage from Isaiah and says, "We see Jesus as this Messiah, this anointed one. Because Jesus, out of complete love and devotion to God lives and dies and rises for the sake of the poorest, for the sake of the vulnerable, and for the sake of the whole world.

We prepare for the gift of this Christ child coming into the world once again, and since we are Christ's living body in the world now, in a mystical way, this passage is about the church, it's about us. Perhaps we should prepare to be born again as a church this Christmas Eve. Since this child will become the church, this child will live on in the church, we should pay attention to how this child is saving the world. Isaiah says, this just ruler will know God, and will do justice – those two things will lead to peace.

I'm currently preparing for a continuing education program I'm participating in. I have an assignment to read a couple books on Family Systems theory. Family systems theory says many things but it says that we behave the way we do in part because of the complicated family systems that have shaped us, because of patterns of behavior that extend back for generations. If we want to improve the health of our relationships, our family, or an organization that we are a part of, we focus on our own behavior. If we behave in healthier ways, that behavior improves the health of the whole system because everyone is connected. The image for family systems theory is a pebble being dropped in water and the ripples extending in all directions.

Anyway, over Thanksgiving I'm talking with my brother-in-law, a passionate, heart of gold, evangelical Christian. We see Christian faith very differently, but I admire and respect him. He's a Christian counselor, his faith is unapologetically a part of his counseling work, and he's studied family systems theory extensively. "Hey, I'm studying family systems theory right now," I say, and he starts talking about how he uses it, how's he's learned so much about himself. And then he says, "What I'm doing every day is helping people with their maturity. And then he says, "Most of the people I'm talking with don't know the Lord." At this point in the conversation I retreat into my head for a while, thinking, "Ok, how do I translate this." Let go of the whole Christianity is the only way, heaven or hell stuff that's in that statement. What is happening in someone when they "know the Lord" as my brother-in-law would say. And I

would say what's happening is that they begin to believe and trust that they are loved. They believe they are loveable, even though everything else in the world tells them they're not. They believe they have worth, they believe they have gifts to share and they start to act differently in the world. They start to act as a true self. This love is a gift, I would say from God. I believe with all my heart that it saves lives in the present. Does this only happen in the church with God language? Of course not. But if we're trying to understand what "knowing God" means, part of it means that we begin to trust in a God of love, a God who loves and who loves us unconditionally, and it changes us. This changes how we see the world, how we feel, and how we behave. But that's not all. For Isaiah, knowing God is about more. Hopefully, this example will help us understand that more.

Sally McFague is one of the theologians I admire. In her book, *Life Abundant*, she writes of realizing that she was good at thinking about God, at living in her head and keeping God at arm's length, but she didn't know God. After she retired from teaching at Vanderbilt she started a centering prayer practice (meditation with a Christian twist). As her practice deepened what she experienced was an overwhelming feeling of being held in God's love. She now says without hesitation that God is love. And, this is important, she experienced being in union with God and God's presence in all of creation. As she experienced union with God and creation, because God was in everything, every act of injustice she witnessed was even more offensive to her. It was offensive to her to see someone who didn't have enough because God was also in that person and because that person was connected to her. Knowing God motivated her even more to do justice in the world. For Isaiah, and we see this in the life of Jesus too, growing closer to God, sends us to do justice, to work towards peace.

I want to talk a little about Pope Francis because I think he has been saying things and acting in ways that are in line with Isaiah's vision for peace. For Pope Francis knowing God

leads to caring for the poor. I think Pope Francis is fascinating. I get a kick out of him. I'm not in line with him on sexual ethics, but he's sure fun to watch. This summer in Rio, 3 million people turned out for mass on the beach. Pope Francis is the only person in the world who could do that. If you define a leader as someone who can turn out a following, you could argue that Pope Francis is the most powerful leader in the world. He recently released a document, the *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, and lots of people are worked up about this. If you listen to these excerpts, you might hear why.

Pope Francis says, "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.

In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.

Behind this attitude lurks a rejection of ethics and a rejection of God. Today in many places we hear a call for greater security. But until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programs or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.

Commentators are wondering what's up with this new Pope. He's so obsessed with the poor. Rush Limbaugh is saying a Marxist has taken over the papacy, and CNN is asking, "is Limbaugh right? Pope Benedict was easier to understand. He liked to wear extremely expensive shoes. That makes sense to us. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis would sneak out in the middle of the night to hang out with homeless people, and there are suspicions that he still does that, as the Pope at the Vatican. Who does that? Pope Francis dares to point out the flaw in 21st century global capitalism. He says it is naïve to trust extremely powerful corporations focused on profit to be at all concerned about the common good, much less the most vulnerable in society. Francis believes sin is still with us and we need to be saved from it. Francis also dares to say that the way to peace won't come through a more sophisticated surveillance apparatus or military spending. Peace will come when the poorest and most vulnerable have what they need.

I don't think the Pope is a Marxist. I think he's a Christian. I think he follows a Christ who embodies the words of Isaiah. Know God and you will do justice. I may not be quite as concerned about the rise of secularism as Pope Francis, but I think part of his concern about the rise of secularism is that in an increasingly secular world, it can be that less and less is sacred. Money and power are valuable but they are not sacred. And without a quest to know God, to grow closer to the ground and source of being, to seek after what is ultimate, we easily lose our ethical grounding. We easily lose sight of the truth that our neighbor is sacred, just like we are. And it is easier to do injustice with indifference.

A child is coming who is a gift to us. This child will show us the way of peace. This child will be born soon. If we pay attention as the church, perhaps we will be reborn as well. Amen.